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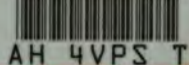
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THE EVILS WHICH HAVE RESULTED AT VARIOUS TIMES FROM
A MISAPPREHENSION OF OUR LORD'S MIRACLES.

EIGHT DISCOURSES

PREACHED BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY
OF CAMBRIDGE IN THE YEAR
MDCCCXLIV.

AT THE LECTURE FOUNDED BY THE
REV. JOHN HULSE, M.A.

BY THE
REV. JOHN HOWARD MARSDEN, B. D.
RECTOR OF GREAT OAKLEY, ESSEX, AND LATE FELLOW
OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE.



LONDON
WILLIAM PICKERING
MDCCCXLV



31, 300

TO
THE REV. WILLIAM HODGSON, D.D.
MASTER OF ST. PETER'S COLLEGE, AND LATE VICE-CHANCELLOR,

THE REV. WILLIAM WHEWELL, D.D.
MASTER OF TRINITY COLLEGE,

AND
THE REV. RALPH TATHAM, D.D.
MASTER OF ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE,

These Discourses,
PREACHED BY THEIR APPOINTMENT,
ARE MOST RESPECTFULLY
INSCRIBED.

THE duty of the Lecturer or Preacher, appointed under the Will of the late Rev. John Hulse, M. A. of St. John's College, was originally to preach twenty Sermons during the year at St. Mary's Church in Cambridge; upon "The Evidence for Revealed Religion; the Truth and Excellence of Christianity; or the more difficult Texts and obscure parts of the Holy Scriptures, such as might appear to be more generally useful and necessary to be explained."

By an order of the Court of Chancery, the number of Lectures has been reduced to eight: and the Preacher is required to print them within twelve months after the delivery of the last Lecture.

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LECTURE I.

[PREACHED ON EASTER DAY.]

EXODUS IV. 1.

BEHOLD, THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME, NOR HEARKEN TO MY VOICE : FOR THEY WILL SAY,—THE LORD HATH NOT APPEARED UNTO THEE.

IN the former course of these Lectures, our attention was directed to certain important announcements made by our blessed Saviour to Nicodemus, at the commencement of his ministry ; and in particular to the clear intimation which he gave of his future rejection by the Jewish rulers, and of his death upon the cross. We endeavoured to trace the process by which these predictions were fulfilled ;—the mode in which men's passions and prejudices operated in accomplishing the designs of Providence. We found reason to believe that our Lord was *rejected*, because he did not answer the popular interpretation of those ancient prophecies, which described in magnificent

phrase and metaphor the glories of the Messiah. We found also, that having been rejected, he was by the same persons *condemned to death*:—being made amenable to the law against blasphemers, on the ground of his having claimed a divine character in calling himself the Son of God. And we know that all this was done in open defiance of his miracles. The works were acknowledged to be supernatural, and yet the commission was not recognized as divine. Their evidence was set aside on the presumption that they were wrought by a Satanic agency, and not by any special interposition of God.

According, then, to the popular definition of “a miracle,” the great question which presented itself to the Jews of old was,—whether the immediate agency in the production of the miracles of Jesus, was that of the Almighty, or of demons. Or,—if it be understood that a miracle cannot be wrought without the direct interposition of God,—whether the works of Jesus were miracles, or not. This question it is now proposed to investigate. We are about to examine how far those unhappy men were justified in acting, as they did, on the assumption that the works which were exhibited before their eyes,—such being the character of him who wrought them,—such the character of his teaching,—and such the character of the works themselves,—were merely Satan’s devices to undermine their faith, and to seduce them from their allegiance to Jehovah.

This proposed arrangement will not only afford me the advantage of pursuing one continuous line throughout the two courses of these Lectures, but will also embrace both of the great subjects to which the Lecturer is especially directed to turn his attention: namely, the "explanation of Scripture," and the demonstration of the "evidence" upon which the divine authority of Scripture rests. In the former course, we were employed in examining an important passage in the Gospel of St. John; a passage, which although neither peculiarly difficult nor obscure, may nevertheless be fairly classed among those, which the Founder of the Lecture has pointed out, as "more generally useful to be explained." And now we proceed to investigate a most essential branch of the evidences for revealed religion, namely the "evidence" of miracles.

When a revelation is published to mankind by one who professes to bear a commission to that effect from the Supreme Governor of the Universe, it is only natural that he should be required to exhibit his credentials. His own bare assertion is not enough. There must be some convincing token of the divine presence and authority: we must see and recognize the broad seal of heaven. No doctrine, however holy and excellent it may be, however consonant with our natural apprehension of the divine attributes, will at first make its way among men without some other force than that of its own intrinsic goodness. If he

who proclaims it, be a man of apparent sincerity, for the doctrine's sake, and for his own sake, we may be disposed to believe him; or at all events to be of opinion, that there is a greater probability of his being an authorized messenger than the reverse. But no further effect than this will be produced, even upon the thoughtful and well-disposed. If the Almighty has in truth communicated to him a direct revelation, as He did to the prophets of old, there can be no doubt that his soul is possessed with an irresistible conviction of the divine original of that which he proclaims. But inasmuch as no man is a competent judge of what passes in the bosom of another, this inward sense can be no ground of conviction to any save the immediate recipient. For how can men either satisfy themselves or convince others, that this self-called messenger from heaven is in reality so void of deceit as he appears to be? Or how can they be satisfied that he has not mistaken the impression of a dream, or the musings of imagination, for reality?—And while he makes so little way with the serious and thoughtful portion of the world, upon the great bulk of mankind, with their evil habits and blind prejudices, he will produce no impression whatever. What moral effect did all the arguments and all the eloquence of ancient philosophy produce upon the character of the multitude in Rome and Athens? How many converts from idolatry were made by their dialogues on the nature of the Gods :—how many bad

men were brought over to the practice of virtue, by their disquisitions upon good and evil? The disease was too deeply rooted to be expelled by so feeble a remedy. Philosophy was taught, indeed, but it was not practised even by the teachers themselves: and it is acknowledged, that the disciples derived no more advantage from it, than a sick man would, by merely listening to the discourses of a physician, without following his advice.

In short, it will scarcely admit of a question, that in order to enforce upon mankind the observance of any stringent precept of moral discipline, in opposition to the selfish passions of their nature, it is necessary in the first place to arouse their attention;—and then to convince them, by some forcible and expeditious mode of proof, that it is the voice of God that speaketh. There must be no long and laborious deductions for them to follow out, no tracing of the dependence of one truth upon another through a tedious and intricate line of consequences. It must be something which all can understand; something of which they will see the meaning and perceive the force at once. A vast majority of mankind are far too busily occupied in providing for their daily sustenance, to find much leisure for the discussion of an argument. They look around, and they see in the works of the creation, a standing evidence of God's existence and attributes. In the continued order of the universe they see a sure demonstration of his

constant Providence. It is on the theatre of nature that they behold the Almighty continually declaring himself; and hence, if he should see fit to make any new and special discovery of his will, it is *here* that they are prepared to look for the evidence of it. Supposing, therefore, that one should come to them as a messenger from heaven, and in proof of his mission should give sight to the blind, or walk upon the sea, or raise a dead man from the grave,—this is precisely the kind of evidence to make an impression upon them. Every one who can distinguish between blindness and the faculty of sight, between a dead corpse and a living man, is able to comprehend its force. However men may be engrossed with worldly business, they will pause to examine it. Like Moses, when the Lord appeared to him in the wilderness, “they will turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.”¹

With the generality of mankind, then, even the truths of natural religion will require some supernatural authority to impress them, with their necessary obligations, upon the mind. How much more, then, will such supernatural authority be required, to introduce those mysterious doctrines and positive institutions, which it may please the Almighty to superadd to the religion of nature! If miracles be

¹ Exodus iii. 3.

required to confirm man's belief in the great doctrine of the immortality of the soul, how much more necessary will they be to induce a faith in such mysteries as the distinction of persons in the Godhead, and the salvation of mankind by the blood and intercession of a Redeemer! In vain would it be to proclaim the nature and efficacy of the Sacraments, and the resurrection of the body from the grave—in vain to preach forgiveness of wrong to the revengeful, and beneficence to the selfish,—in vain to exhort the churlish to do to others as he would have others do to him,—unless the messenger speak with more than human authority. No revelation, in short, upon those points which are of the most overwhelming importance, will be received without the evidence of miracles: and the more important the doctrine, the more needful will it be to bring a supernatural confirmation of it. Without miracles, the messenger will be thrust aside, like one who reprov'd a wrongful man in the days of old; and they will cry out,—“Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?”² Fearful, if not despairing, he will be constrained to exclaim,—“Behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice, for they say,—The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.”

Circumstances, however, *may* occur, in which it might be possible for a pretended messenger from

² Exodus ii. 14.

heaven in some degree to establish his claim to divine authority, *without* the aid of miracles.

If, for instance, to some untutored and barbarous race of men, whose traditional knowledge of the truth is debased and darkened, if not totally lost, in idolatry, —if to such a race of men there should be offered a pretended revelation, having for its basis the great principle of the unity of God, and giving out that the truth, originally delivered to the Prophets and Patriarchs of old, was now to be restored to its original purity. If this revelation should contain no strict precepts of humiliation and self-denial, imposing little or no restraint upon the sensual appetites, requiring no change of heart, placing among its primary obligations, the easy and salubrious rites of an outward ceremonial. If at first, while powerless, it should speak the language of peace and toleration ; and having, by degrees, stirred up a warlike spirit among a courageous race of men, should then begin to breathe fiery denunciations against its opponents ; announcing a divine commission to exterminate unbelievers, and to propagate the true faith at the point of the sword. If it should find a ready access to the hearts of men, by promising the most exquisite joys of a voluptuous paradise to those whose destiny it may be to expend their lives in the cause, and to those who survive to divide the spoil, every gratification of avarice and lust ; declaring that a drop of blood shed in the cause of God, or a night spent in

arms, is of more avail than many days' fasting and prayer; and offering a higher reward in heaven to those who fight for the faith, than to those who merely perform the peaceful and obscure duties of domestic life. If it should describe in glowing terms the future anguish of infidels, and the still more bitter torment of apostates. If it should abstain from any interference with the sacred character of more ancient forms of faith; offering at first little or no violence to religious prejudices; treating, with an affectation of respect, names that have been held in reverence of old:—professing to be sent for the express purpose of healing divisions, and to bind men together in one common and universal faith; and yet turning to its own advantage the mutual hostility of contending sects. Under such circumstances as these,—in the absence of many of those obstacles which must have impeded the progress of the Gospel of Christ,—it might be possible for this pretended revelation to gain a footing in the world, although unsupported by miracles. For if once its author succeeds in establishing a spiritual dominion over the minds of a small body of followers, he may then persuade them that the evidence of miracles is unnecessary: or he may venture, perhaps, to assert the performance of miracles, without the inconvenience of being called upon for proof. Such was the case of old with the pretended Prophet of Arabia; and such also, in some respects, has been the case with another

Impostor whom it has been reserved for our own age to produce, in one of the remoter and less civilized states of the great republic of the West.³

To institute a parallel between these two pretended messengers from heaven,—between the conqueror of Arabia, the founder of a civil and religious empire, the author of a mighty revolution, which changed the features, whether social or political, of half the countries of the known world ;—to institute a comparison between one, to whom, so far as he brought his idolatrous countrymen to the knowledge and worship of one Supreme Creator, must certainly be awarded the credit of having opened their eyes to some faint glimmering of the truth ;—to institute a comparison between him and that Impostor of modern times, will scarcely be thought to be—what in truth it is—a work of serious and sober earnestness. But when it is considered, that with all the apparent disadvantages of mean origin, and unlettered ignorance, and infamous reputation,⁴—with so little about him to spread the contagion of enthusiasm,—with scarcely one better quality to redeem the falsehood and treachery, the cruelty and selfishness of his character ;—well described by one who knows him well, as “ a polluted mass of corruption, iniquity and fraud ;”—when it is considered that this man, in the

³ The founder of the American Sect of Mormonites.

⁴ See an account of the Sect of Mormonites, by the Rev. H. Caswall.

nineteenth century, and among professing Christians, has in our own country attached to himself several thousand disciples, and not less than a hundred thousand in the West, during a period in which the faith of Mahomet was working its slow and painful progress in comparative obscurity. When we see him already assuming the regal office as well as the sacerdotal, giving laws to his Medina,⁵ raising new fortifications, assembling an army round his person, and indulging in projects of conquest and spoliation.⁶ When all this is considered, it will appear that in the two cases there is at least one striking similarity ;—each affording an instance of the wonderful effects accomplished by religious fanaticism, in the hands of subtle and unscrupulous ambition.

Were it not a departure from the object which we have more immediately in view, it would be an easy task to give in *detail*, the points of resemblance between them. In each of these pretended revelations, it is acknowledged that Moses and our blessed Saviour were Prophets, and that Jesus was greater than all who had preceded him. In fact, the modern impostor has engrafted his own scriptures upon the historical part of the Bible ; putting them forth as a continuation or supplement : and like the Koran, they

⁵ “The Holy City of Nauvoo,” on the Mississippi,—which is stated to contain already 12,000 inhabitants.

⁶ Soon after this, the pretended Prophet lost his life in a popular tumult ; and yet his followers are still increasing.

are a palpable imitation of Holy Writ, both in thought and diction. In each of these pretended revelations there is a studious assertion of the wonderful dignity and infallibility of its own Prophet. Each abounds in promises rather than precepts, and each is diffuse and circumstantial in its description of a future state. If the Arabian Prophet placed the practical part of religion in the observance of an easy code of morals, and a not very onerous ceremonial; the other makes it to consist, for the most part, in feeling and impulse;—estimating the believer's growth not by the degree of fidelity with which he performs the moral duties of life, but by the amount of pleasurable sensations which he may be able to excite in his own bosom. In each the standard of morals is far below that of the Gospel; and each makes a special allowance for the irregularities of its own Prophet. In each there is a studied perversion and falsification of the Bible; and in the latter, this species of impiety is of the most revolting description. The point, however, to which our attention must be especially directed, is that of miracles. In each it is tacitly acknowledged that miracles are needful, for miraculous visions are made the very basis upon which the revelation rests; but in each there is a positive disclaimer of all *real* miracles, that is, of all such as depend upon external and independent testimony. Each of these impostors "bears record of himself;" and his record is nothing more than the unsupported asser-

tion of a bold and profligate adventurer. When the Prophet of Mecca expatiated upon the inimitable beauties of his Koran,—challenging either angels or men to equal the transcendent beauties of a single passage, and appealing to the perfection of his revelation as a sufficient proof of its divine origin,—his opponents called upon him for some visible sign from heaven. They desired that he would bring down an angel to confirm his mission; that he would create a garden in the desert, or kindle a conflagration in the unbelieving city. To which he replied, that if they would not believe in God's word which he had promulgated, although a revelation should be given by which mountains are removed, or the earth cloven in sunder, or the dead caused to speak, it would still be ineffectual. He told them that God in his merciful providence refuses such signs and wonders, as would depreciate the merit of faith, and aggravate the-guilt of infidelity. And that the only reason for which he had not been sent with the evidence of miracles, like other prophets before him, was, that the miracles of those prophets had been charged with imposture.

Similar in purport, but marked with a more audacious impiety, are the answers given to a similar demand by the Prophet of the West. In one place he denies that the miracles of the Bible were intended to be any attestation of a divine commission; asserting that they were simply acts of compassion, wrought for the special benefit of those particular believers

who were the objects of them. In another place, the reply is abruptly given in a perverted passage of Scripture—"A wicked and adulterous nation seeketh for a sign, and verily there shall no sign be given them." In another, the inquirer is gravely dismissed with the following advice :—"If you wish to receive proof of the doctrine, ask in faith, as we have done, and it shall be given you." In other words,—first believe, then inquire, and then you shall know it to be true. And yet, in the face of this attempt to depreciate the evidence of miracles, it is upon miraculous evidence indirectly, that is, upon the pretended evidence of prophecy, that this impostor founds his claim. He alleges the preternatural discovery of a number of sacred documents, collected and composed by an inspired Jew in the fourth century, and hidden in the earth from that time to the present. In these documents it is predicted that a seer shall arise in the latter days, who shall be divinely commissioned to bring them forth from their hiding place ; adding to them other words which God shall speak unto him ; and amid many conflicting opinions, restoring the true faith. These are the prophet's credentials ; and these credentials, after all, rest upon a pretended miracle.

If, then, it should be thought, that the rapid and wide propagation of an imposture, such as either of those to which we have been alluding, affords any argument that a divine revelation like the Gospel,

might gain a footing among men without the concomitant evidence of miracles, it will be found on further examination, that the circumstances are entirely dissimilar, and that the conclusion is false. That men will be predisposed to embrace a system, which rather sanctions than condemns the indulgence of carnal appetites,—and that they will be predisposed to reject another, which not only forbids the outward act, but the inward desire, the adultery committed in the heart,—needs no demonstration. And after all, each of these systems of faith is founded upon a pretended miracle ; and a miracle, too, which being void of all external testimony, is of the kind which must necessarily carry with it the least weight.

It is altogether superfluous, and beyond the scope of the present design, to occupy the time in recapitulating objections which have been made to the proof by miracles in the abstract, or to tell in this place the often-told tale of the fallacy of those objections. We do not deny that miracles are “contrary to experience;”—that is, to *our own* experience;—but to assume that they were contrary to the experience of our Lord’s contemporaries, is to assume the very point in question. It is acknowledged that “the course of nature is unalterable;” or in other words, that it is governed by laws which *man* is not permitted to interfere with:—in fact it is this consideration which gives to the miracle its efficacy, as a

proof that the revelation proceeds from God. It is acknowledged, that the laws established by a Creator of infinite wisdom, for the government of the material creation, cannot be supposed to stand in need of subsequent alteration, or to require that he should derange the machine and suspend its operations in order to improve it. But it is no imputation on the wisdom of those laws, to suppose that they may be suspended for some purpose of a *moral* character; for the purpose of exerting an influence over the *minds* of men, in matters relating to their eternal happiness. It is acknowledged that it would be derogatory to the Almighty's character, to represent him as altering his plans, ordaining one thing, and issuing a subsequent ordinance to counteract it. But who shall undertake to say, that the system of miraculous evidence may not have been ordained from the very foundation of the world? It is acknowledged that our acquaintance with the powers of nature is imperfect, especially as to their extent, and that we may consequently be led to ascribe to supernatural agency, that which is in reality the effect of natural causes, unperceived by us, and unknown. But nevertheless, to walk upon the sea, to raise to life a corpse already advancing in the stages of putrefaction, are acts so far beyond the reach of any power with which man has hitherto been acquainted, as to make it incredible that a merciful God would permit them to be performed before his creatures for the mere purpose of delusion.

One of those miracles, the latest and most important of them all, we are called upon this day to commemorate. We recognize in it not only a stupendous manifestation of Divine power, but also, in a double sense, the fulfilment of prophecy. It was a proof that the Psalmist spoke true, when he said,—“Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption :” and it was that “sign of the prophet Jonas,” spoken of by our blessed Lord himself, and declared to be the only sign which should be given to an “evil and adulterous generation.” It was a miracle, to the truth of which, even the Chief Priests and Pharisees by their studied precautions, gave an unwilling evidence. *All* the miracles proved that Jesus “came from God :” but *this* miracle proved that he had accomplished the object for which God had sent him, by triumphing over sin and death. When the widow’s son of Nain, the daughter of Jairus at Capernaum, and Lazarus of Bethany, were raised to life from the dead, it was only a temporary suspension of the tyrant’s power,—a brief respite from the doom that still awaited them. The bodies in which they rose were the same “natural” bodies in which they died : and ere long the dark valley of the shadow of death was to be travelled by them again. But when Jesus rose from the grave, it was in a “spiritual” and glorified body. “Death had no more dominion over him.”—He was “the first fruits of them that slept.”

When the disciples, faithless and faint-hearted, had seen the stone rolled to the door of the sepulchre, all their hopes being buried with *Him* in whom those hopes had centered, they departed to their homes in shame, and sorrow, and confusion of face. As the sky is darkest during the hour that precedes the break of day, so was the face of the Church during that awful interval. But at length the "sun of righteousness" arose, and the darkness was dispelled for ever. In like manner as our Lord's former miracles had proved his power and beneficence, his disposition to do good to the bodies and souls of men, and his perfect ability to suspend the laws of nature with that gracious intent; so this last and greatest miracle proved the certainty of our own resurrection, and all the points of doctrine connected with that important truth. The soul's separate existence from the body, its immortal nature, and its future existence in happiness or misery, are all implied in the great event which we now commemorate. To use the words of that blessed Apostle who first entered the sepulchre, and saw with his eyes the reality of what had taken place;—God hath "begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead; to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away."⁷

⁷ 1 Peter i. 3.

LECTURE II.

LUKE XI. 15.

BUT SOME OF THEM SAID—HE CASTETH OUT DEVILS BY BEELZEBUB
THE PRINCE OF DEVILS.

IT will be agreed, perhaps, that such a revelation as that of the Gospel, imposing duties so repugnant to man's natural propensities, and enjoining a constant control over some of the most powerful passions by which he is actuated, is not likely to make its way to general acceptance, without some unquestionable evidence of its coming with the authority of God. An objection, however, which has been brought to the mode of evidence by miracles, will here demand our consideration. Not as in itself of more importance than others which have been passed over without remark, but as being closely connected with the question touching the prevalent opinions among the Jews on the subject of miracles, which it is proposed to investigate.

It has been alleged, that the mode of confirming a

revelation by miracles, wrought in one place, and at one period of time, is liable to the imputation of partiality. That to those who are the subjects and eyewitnesses of such miracles, the evidence is altogether overpowering. That its impression continually grows fainter under the operation of time, so that each successive race of men is submitted to a moral trial of greater severity than that of the age which preceded it. And that at length the trial becomes one of such extreme and disproportionate severity, when compared with that of the contemporary generation, as to be incompatible with our ideas of the mercy, and even of the justice, of Almighty God.

If such were, indeed, the case, it is not easy to see by what mode it would be possible for any messenger from heaven to be accredited, or his revelation proved to be divine. Whether the doctrine were of God, or whether it were of man, according to this mode of argument, it must alike "come to nought." Perhaps it might be suggested, that the difficulty would be obviated by a periodical repetition of miracles. But would not such a repetition of miracles frustrate the very design which it is intended to promote? For if miracles were made an every-day occurrence, they would at length produce no more effect upon men's minds than the rising of the sun, the ebbing and flowing of the tide, or the return of fresh life and verdure in the spring. In fact, they would cease to be miracles.

Such speculations as these, however, are altogether unnecessary and out of place; inasmuch as the notion of partiality in this mode of evidence is, in itself, purely theoretical. If we look more closely into the actual arrangement of things, we shall find that the trial which falls upon the successive generations of men in their turn, is one of unvarying severity. For although an intelligent and right-minded man of the present day, on witnessing the performance of such miracles as those of Jesus, would at once be convinced that he who wrought them was invested thereby with a Divine commission and authority, it must be remembered that in our Saviour's time such a conclusion was by no means inevitable. In the judgment of that generation, acts of superhuman power were not necessarily received as the acts of God. There was a general belief in the powers of sorcery or magic: and it was easy to stifle investigation by ascribing to the influence of that principle any surpassing performance, which they could not otherwise explain, and the testimony of which they knew not how to invalidate. This was the course which, in fact, they adopted. For although it is not expressly stated in the Gospels that they ascribed to the prince of devils any miracles except the casting out of devils, it must certainly be implied that such was the case. To suppose that the same person could one day be working with the finger of God, and the next day with the power of Satan, is utterly incredible;

as indeed it was felt to be, by one who put to the Pharisees this very pertinent question—"Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?" If you ascribe to Satanic agency the casting out of devils, to the same agency you must ascribe the opening of the eyes of the blind; which latter position the objector was inclined to dispute. The Pharisees, however, asserted it, and their assertion was believed. To come away from the spectacle of one of our Lord's miracles, with a determination to press forward in the inquiry,—“to try the spirits whether they were of God,”¹—and, like the Bereans of old, “to search the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so,”²—required a degree of sincerity and of fortitude, which in these days can scarcely be appreciated. And of the few who persevered in such an inquiry, there would be required some considerable exercise of moral and mental fairness; quite as great, perhaps, as is now requisite for those who would estimate aright the whole weight of evidence presented to an inquirer among ourselves. The *evidence* of the *fact*,—as, for instance, that a blind man had been caused to see, by the ostensible operation of certain words pronounced over him by a Galilean peasant,—was doubtless irresistible. But the *inference* from that fact; namely, that the aforesaid Galilean peasant was a messenger from God,—and if a messenger from God, then the incarnate Son of God Himself,—this they were un-

¹ 1 John iv. 1.² Acts xvii. 11.

prepared to admit. And the degree in which they were worse prepared to admit the inference, was at least equal to the degree in which they were better prepared to appreciate the evidence of the fact. If the sceptic of modern times has been known to say,—"Only convince me that Lazarus was raised from the dead, and I will admit the entire substance of what is taught in the Gospel;"—so the sceptical Sadducee of old might have said,—“Only convince me that thou dost not cast out devils by the prince of devils, and I will believe all that thou sayest.” Circumstances are changed, and with them the species of trial has been changed. If our own experience of the conveyance of ordinary testimony assures us, that it is liable to numberless misrepresentations, which, at every successive remove, both violate its purity and impair its credit, so that we conceive ourselves to be placed in a position much less favourable than that of our Lord’s immediate contemporaries; it must be considered, on the other hand, that men in the present day are much less likely to be imposed upon;—that it is no longer possible to pass off as miracles the mysterious operations of nature, or the juggling feats of art;—and that a sounder mode of judging with respect to the association of miracles with doctrine, has shown us the perverse impiety of ascribing such miracles as those of Jesus to the agency of Satan. And thus we are led to contemplate the Divine wisdom, which has tempered the severity of the trial by the admixture of external

circumstances. A trial it still remains of the same essential character ; a trial of lowliness and docility, —of those qualities of soul which are most suitable to man's present condition, as an aspirant after God's favour, and a probationer for the pure and holy pleasures of His presence in Paradise.

With the question in the abstract, whether from reason and revelation there is sufficient evidence to induce a belief that evil spirits are allowed to exercise among men a supernatural power, we have no immediate concern. Our object is more particularly to ascertain the prevalent opinion in Judæa, among our Lord's immediate contemporaries. At the same time, we must not pass over unnoticed the argument which is adduced from analogy in support of the affirmative.

On the supposition that there exist other orders of beings, between man and his Creator, with powers and properties corresponding to the stations which they occupy ; there is nothing improbable in the idea, that they, like ourselves, are left in some degree to the free exercise of those powers. By a skilful use of the means and materials which nature has given even to ourselves, it is unquestionably possible to produce effects in the external world, which to an unenlightened body of spectators would appear truly miraculous. By man's ingenuity the elements are pressed into his service, and the mechanism of nature is directed to perform his pleasure. The buoyancy of water, the elasticity of steam, and other of nature's

subtle and mysterious properties, are daily producing effects, which must appear as truly supernatural to the untutored savage, as some of the real miracles of old. Man quits his own province, and invades that which nature has appropriated to others. And in this his agency is altogether free :—his application of the knowledge and power which he possesses is without restraint. What is there to prevent him from setting out on a voyage to the simple-minded inhabitants of some remote island ; and there, having attracted their notice and gained their confidence by the performance of acts which appear to them supernatural, from proclaiming to them whatever dogmas of immorality and impiety he chooses ? If man, then, is not restrained by any special law from practising such deception upon his fellow men, by the simple use of the faculties with which nature has endowed him, who shall say that there is any special law to restrain those superior beings from exercising their proper powers, within the limits of man's province,—or, in other words, from lending their aid to the performance of miracles ? If it be not inconsistent with the Divine wisdom to *create* such beings, surely it is not to be deemed inconsistent with the Divine wisdom to permit the exercise of any power with which it has been judged fit to endow them.

But is it not an impeachment of the Divine benevolence, to suppose that such supernatural power may be exercised for purposes of delusion ?

If any one were to assert, that such malignant agency is permitted to work without limitation and without control, it would indeed be a bold and impious assumption. But the fact is, that both parties profess an implicit confidence in the Divine benevolence; differing only in their notion of the mode in which that benevolence is likely to be exercised. The one party believe most undoubtingly, that a benevolent Creator will not permit us to be exposed to trial from which there are no means of escape;—the other affirm, that although the world is full of trials, this particular trial is one which we shall never have to encounter. Though men are tempted and deceived every day by the craft of their fellow men, and by the operation of natural causes; that they should be exposed to such deception by acts beyond the usual course of things, is thought incredible. Although spiritual agency *in general* is employed to sift and try men's faith, and that with the most consummate subtlety, from *this* particular branch of spiritual agency it is assumed that we are exempt. And yet, is it not possible, and even likely, that the ordinary mode of temptation, which is by a secret influence of the devil upon the soul, may be even more subtle and perilous than the exhibition of deceptive miracles? In the case of a miracle performed in support of any doctrine which militates against our natural perception of what is right, we should be naturally on our guard: whereas to the subtle insinuations of the

father of lies, we are predisposed by our carnal passions to lend a willing ear. If the miracle were such as to *command* an acquiescence in the doctrine, whether true or false, with which it is connected,—if the Almighty had issued a special injunction that miracles should in all cases be admitted without question, as the criterion of a divine mission,—of course no subordinate being would be permitted, in that case, to exercise a miraculous power, except in confirmation of His will. But if He has given us a faculty, by which we are enabled to discriminate between such doctrines as are, and such as are not, consistent with His attributes; then the trial to which we are exposed becomes similar in its character to our ordinary trials,—severe, but by no means insurmountable. After having cautioned His people against the delusion of a sign or a wonder given by false prophets, the Almighty expects them to be careful in their inquiries into the proofs of all pretended missions from Himself. If they are deceived, the deception is in some degree voluntary: the shield is put into their hands, but they refuse to make use of it. That the moral faculties, by which we are enabled to challenge the imposture, and to discover from his doctrine that the messenger has not come from God, are seldom exercised, may be true. But if we are in possession of such faculties, the delusion is not necessarily irresistible; nor is it an impugning of the Divine benevolence to suppose it possible that man may be exposed to it.

In fact, this argument from the Divine benevolence, if it proves any thing, seems to prove too much. It goes to prove, that it is inconsistent with the Divine benevolence to suffer men to fall into severe temptation ; though we know from experience that they fall into such temptation every day. The trial of that man,—if such there should ever be—who sees a miracle wrought in support of a system which his moral sense disapproves ;—a system, for instance, of fraud and cruelty ;—would not be more severe, than the trial of another who must go to the stake or the scaffold, if he refuses to abjure the creed which he solemnly believes to be true. Our notion of the Divine attributes, whether derived from reason or revelation, will prevent us from believing that any man will be exposed to a temptation from which there is no way to escape : but to prescribe the exact degree and specific kind of temptation which shall assail us, is to take into our own hands the moral government of the world.

The sum of the matter, then, is this :—They who hold that a subordinate being is allowed to work miracles, must admit nevertheless, that he is restricted from the exhibition of such miracles as may not be distinguished, by some sure and intelligible mark, from those which the Almighty gives as a seal and testimony of His revelations. And they who believe, that no miracles can be wrought except by His immediate interposition, must take it for granted that

there is a perpetual law to restrain all subordinate agents, from using their natural faculties in any interference with what *we* call the "order of nature." Each reposing a full confidence in the Divine goodness, and differing only in their idea of the peculiar mode in which that goodness is exercised.

Having thus endeavoured to state the question as to the antecedent probability or improbability of an evil agency being allowed in the working of miracles, I proceed to inquire what opinion prevailed upon this subject among the Jews who were contemporary with our Saviour.

Supposing, then, a miracle, like those of our blessed Saviour, to be wrought in the presence of an assembled multitude; according to the different characters and tempers of those present, it would produce different effects. One class would gaze upon it with a kind of passive wonder; a feeling insufficient to urge them either to investigate a cause, or to draw an inference. If their own ease or indulgence were in any way affected, they would regard it with interest; but not otherwise. It is probable that in our Saviour's time, this class of persons constituted a large proportion of the eyewitnesses of his miracles. "They sought him, not because they saw the miracles; but because they did eat of the loaves, and were filled."³ Any slight curiosity that might be excited

³ John vi. 26.

on the subject, would at once be set at rest by the summary declaration of their teachers, that for some unmentioned cause the miracles were not conclusive of Divine authority. In a case which is especially recorded, after vainly attempting to make it appear that no real miracle had been performed, they dismissed the man who had been the subject of it, with the following conclusive admonition :—" Give God the praise, we *know* that this man is a *sinner*."⁴ Sitting in Moses' seat, they assumed a like authority with that of Moses : and their assertion, although unsupported, was not without its weight.

But while a large proportion of the spectators, either through incompetency or indolence, resting upon this broken reed of the Pharisees' authority, would spare themselves the trouble of investigating the cause, a few more inquisitive minds would proceed further. According to the popular notions of the day, there were three modes of accounting for an apparent miracle. These were,—by the interposition of God, —by the agency of evil spirits,—and by the presumption that it was a mere trick or delusion. To admit the first of these causes, and to receive the miracles as valid proofs of a Divine commission, both Jews and Gentiles were extremely indisposed, both at the time of our Saviour's ministry, and for a considerable period afterwards. This appears, not only

⁴ John ix. 24.

from the Scriptures, but from the fragments of several opponents of Christianity which are still extant, and from the general line of argument pursued by some of the early fathers. The number and nature and variety of our Lord's miracles would prevent any rational man from setting them down as mere delusions of art; nor do the Jews appear to have attempted it. The prevailing cry, when they proceeded to suggest a cause at all, was that of enchantment and evil spirits; the belief in which mode of agency seems to have been universal.⁵

That His ministering spirits have been, in certain instances, commissioned by the Creator to exercise a supernatural power, is unquestionable; as will appear from a reference to the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the deliverance of Lot, and

⁵ The reader may take an interest in being informed "how the events of the Gospel History are regarded by the Israelites of *modern* Jerusalem,"—"in some sort the representatives, if not the actual descendants" of those who rejected the miracles, and crucified Him who wrought them. A recent traveller gives us the result of his inquiry.—"I understood that the performance of the miracles was not doubted by any of the Jews in the place; all of them concurred in attributing the works of our Lord to the influence of magic, but they were divided as to the species of enchantment from which the power proceeded. The great mass of the Jewish people believed, I fancy, that the miracles had been wrought by aid of the powers of darkness; but many, and those the more enlightened, would call Jesus "The Good Magician."—*EOTHEN, or Traces of Travels brought home from the East*, p. 231.

the smiting of the army of Sennacherib. Although the notion of free agency on the part of the angel in these visitations is expressly precluded by the context, the minds of men would be familiarized thereby to the idea of spiritual agency in general. In the account of the competition between Moses and the magicians of Egypt, they would find certain facts still more decidedly bearing upon the point in question. If Jannes and Jambres were permitted to withstand God's Prophet, and up to a certain point, at least, to work the same wonders as Moses himself; might not an eyewitness of the miracles of Jesus be sincerely of opinion, that this self-styled messenger from God, of whom it was reported that he wished to destroy the temple and to abrogate the Law, was permitted to try their faith by the exhibition of wonders in no degree more indicative of a superhuman power than the changing of a rod into a serpent, or of rivers of water into blood? What can be inferred from the forcible and explicit warning in the Law, against the "enchanter, the witch, the charmer, the consulter with familiar spirits, the necromancer, the wizard," and "him that useth divination"⁶—what can we infer from this explicit mention of so many varieties of the same mysterious character,—but that he exercised, or, at least, was generally believed to exercise, his vocation among them? And again, in later times,

⁶ Deut. xviii. 10.

when the prophet Isaiah calls upon "the astrologers, the star-gazers, the monthly prognosticators" in the city of Babylon, to stand up and save themselves from destruction,⁷—when he tells the proud city herself to stand "with her enchantments, and the multitude of her sorceries; if so be she shall be able to profit, if so be she may prevail,"—although taunting them with the emptiness and insufficiency of their art, he gives clear proof that it stood in high repute, and that many had confidence in its efficacy. St. Paul speaks of one who should come with "lying wonders,"—"after the working of Satan;"⁸ and of those also to whom "God shall send strong delusion, that they may believe a lie."⁹ And our blessed Lord himself warned his disciples against "false prophets and false Christs" that should arise, and "show great signs and wonders; insomuch that if it were possible, they should deceive the very elect."¹⁰

Of the popular belief in another branch of Satanic agency, I mean demoniacal possession, there can be no doubt whatever. It might be sufficient, perhaps, for our present purpose, to advert to the mere prevalence of this belief: but I will also call your attention to various particulars in the account of these cases by the Evangelists, which lead us to conclude that the mode of expression was not adopted merely

⁷ Isaiah xlvii. 12, 13.

⁸ 2 Thess. ii. 9.

⁹ 2 Thess. ii. 11.

¹⁰ Matt. xxiv. 24.

in conformity with popular prejudices, but that the possession was real. We find the action of the demon expressly distinguished from that of the man possessed: we find the demon holding a conversation on the subject of his expulsion; and we find a special account of the manner in which he was disposed of afterwards.¹¹ What can more distinctly mark the personality of the evil spirit, and the separate personality of the man, into whose body he had entered, as Satan entered into the body of the serpent, than the circumstantial narrative of the Evangelist?—"Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit,"—said Jesus.¹² Upon which the evil spirit came out: and the man, becoming tranquil, prayed that he might be suffered to remain in the presence of his deliverer.

It is to be observed, too, that many of the demoniacs mentioned in the New Testament agree in paying homage to our Lord and his disciples, with a degree of consistency, which in the case of persons suffering under natural diseases, whether of the body or the mind, is scarcely credible. If these persons had been merely lunatics, their conduct would have been marked with the characteristic and capricious vagaries of lunacy. Some might have worshipped Jesus, but others would have treated him with insult. Some might have followed him, but others would have fled away from him; just as they were affected

¹¹ Matt. viii. 31.

¹² Mark v. 8.

by the disease. Whereas they all seem to have been actuated by a common feeling :—they all paid him worship.

In fact, the frequency of the cases of demoniacal possession about the time of our Lord's appearance, might almost lead us to suppose, either that Satan by these frequent possessions, and by the wonderful actions which were performed, strove to invalidate the evidence of our Lord's miracles, giving occasion to the Pharisees to ascribe them to the same agency ; —or, that inasmuch as he “ was manifested, in order that he might destroy the works of the devil,” it pleased the Almighty to give Satan the greater liberty about that time, for the express purpose of heightening the glory of our Lord in dispossessing him, and of affording thereby the strongest evidence, that the power which tended in so eminent a degree to the destruction of Satan's empire, must assuredly be of God.

The prevalence of a belief in the powers of magic in the *heathen* world at that period, is too well known to require more than a passing allusion. It reigned in every climate of the globe, and was compatible with every system of religious opinion. Men of all ranks, statesmen, scholars, and philosophers, were found in the number of its votaries. Truly has it been remarked, that the genius of those times was in a middle state between credulity and scepticism, believing all that ought to be doubted, and doubting all that ought to be believed.

And although the different sects of philosophy were divided in their opinions,—the Pythagoreans advocating its reality, and the Epicureans deriding it,—we find that Celsus, a professed Epicurean, who had written several books against magic, reiterates the cry of our Lord's contemporaries; asserting, with marvellous inconsistency, that "the Christians seemed to prevail by the names and enchantments of certain demons."¹³ In the very epithets applied to Christianity by two Roman historians, we trace at once the prevalence of this imputation: the same terms of reprobation being attached to the Christian faith, which were usually applied to the art of magic. Magic was deemed a mischievous and destructive art;—Christianity was styled a mischievous and destructive superstition.¹⁴ In fact, a belief in this mystic power, which professed to control the order of the planets, to blast the works of creation, to inflame the passions, and to extinguish or recall life, retained possession of men's minds to a comparatively recent period. There can be little difficulty in understanding that acts of wonder might be ascribed to evil spirits nearly two thousand years ago by the Jews, when it is remembered that the crime of witchcraft has been recognized in the legislative enactments of the most enlightened nations of modern Europe; and

¹³ Orig. adv. Cels. l. i. p. 7.

¹⁴ By Suetonius, "*superstitio malefica*:"—by Tacitus, "*exitiabilis superstitio*."

that the gravest functionaries of the law have sat in judgment upon those accused of it, and condemned them to the flames. There can be little difficulty in understanding that the Pharisees of old might depreciate the miracles of Jesus, and ascribe them to any cause rather than the right one, when we find the Mahometan disputant of the present day gravely arguing,—that since the powers of nature and the powers of magic are alike involved in mystery as to their complete extent, and since the world is in a constant state of improvement, no act whatever can be fully known to be a miracle, until the arrival of the day of judgment.¹⁵

Enough has been said to show the prevalence of the belief in an infernal agency, at the time when the miracles of Jesus were performed. It will be my endeavour on a future opportunity, to point out the most striking part of the evidence, both in the *miracles* themselves, and in the *doctrine* connected with them, that he who wrought them was a messenger from God, and not a confederate with the powers of evil.

¹⁵ See *Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Mahometanism*, by the late Rev. Henry Martyn, B.D. pp. 194—215.

LECTURE III.

JOHN X. 21.

THESE ARE NOT THE WORDS OF ONE THAT HATH A DEVIL.

TO those who would ascertain the opinions on the subject of miracles which prevailed among the Jews, at a period not far removed from that of our Saviour, the reflections of a pious and enlightened writer present themselves, in the Apocryphal Book of Wisdom. He compares the whole creation to an instrument of music, varied and regulated in the hands of its Supreme Governor to one purpose of harmony. In the process of Israel's miraculous deliverance from their Egyptian bondage, "Every creature," he says, "was fashioned anew, serving the peculiar commandments that were given unto them. The things of the earth were changed into things of the water; and the things that before did swim upon the water, went upon the ground. The fire had power in the water, contrary to its own virtue; and the water forgot his own nature to quench. Thus the elements were changed among themselves by a kind of harmony; as when the tune is changed upon

an instrument of music, and the melody still remaineth.”¹

In this passage, we mark how the writer dwells upon that subserviency of the *elements* to God's prophet, of which his forefathers had so often been eye-witnesses. In fact, it was by controlling the elements, and in some instances by changing their natural operation, that the Almighty had usually chosen to give evidence of his immediate presence and interposition. When He called to Moses in the wilderness, the *fire* forgot its nature to burn, and the bush remained as before. When He guided Israel in their wanderings in the desert, it was a pillar of *fire* that went before them; in the words of that writer whom we have just quoted, it was, “a harmless sun to entertain them honourably.”² He descended upon Mount Sinai in *fire*: and by *fire* from heaven He consumed the sacrifice of Elijah. The *sun* stood still upon Gibeon, at the command of His servant Joshua, and the *moon* stayed in the valley of Ajalon. When He gave the Law, the *mountain quaked*; and when He destroyed the congregation of Korah, the *earth* opened her mouth and swallowed them up alive.—“The *sea* fled at His presence, and *Jordan* was driven back.”—“He turned the hard *rock* into a standing *water*, and the *flint-stone* into a springing *well*.”—In that memorable competition

¹ Wisdom of Solomon, ch. xix.

² Ibid. ch. xviii. 3.

between Moses and the magicians of Egypt, the Divine interposition was acknowledged even by those who opposed it, and they said, "This is the finger of God." At their own word, indeed, the rod had become a living serpent, the frogs had left their marshy bed to invade the dwellings of man, and the waters were turned into blood. But at the word of God's prophet, there came down hail and fire *from heaven*; and the land was covered with *darkness*, "even a darkness that might be felt." In the dwellings of Israel there was light: but the Egyptians "saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days."—"Being shut up in their houses (says the writer already quoted), the prisoners of darkness, and fettered, not with bars of iron, but with the bonds of a long night, they lay there fugitives from the eternal Providence. Noises as of falling waters sounded about them; and sad visions appeared unto them with heavy countenances. And being much terrified, they thought the things which they saw to be worse than the sights they saw not."³

In this subserviency of the elements—in these "signs from heaven"—there was an external grandeur, which seemed to stamp them with the impress of Jehovah's immediate interposition. In our Lord's miracles, and especially in the earlier of them, this

³ Wisdom of Solomon, ch. xvii.

characteristic was wanting. The elements, indeed, were subject to his control; and on two occasions the stormy winds and the swelling waves became still when he commanded them. But of these miracles one took place in the night, with no other witnesses than his own disciples. In fact, the subjects of our Lord's miracles were, for the most part, not the elements of nature, but the bodies of afflicted men—the blind, the maimed, the dumb, and the cripple. This characteristic was doubtless pointed out to their disparagement by our Lord's opponents at the time; and the people were called upon to observe, that the miracles of old were wrought on a far more gigantic scale, and presented a far more imposing character, than the *cures* wrought by the Galilean. It was not enough that five thousand persons were miraculously supplied with food, unless the bread came down, like the manna in the wilderness, "from heaven." In the midst of his daily works of wonder and mercy, exhibited upon all who came to him for relief, there was a daily repetition of the same cry—"Show us a sign *from heaven*."

In the place, however, of this characteristic which marked the ancient miracles, there was given another, of a different character indeed, but not less decisive. Each was suited to its particular exigency. The one class of miracles were wrought to assert Jehovah's supremacy over the idols of Canaan, or the "juggling fiends of Egypt;"—to make known his

power over those who would attempt, by rival miracles, to discredit his messenger, and persuade men to disregard his message;—while the others were wrought to establish the Divine commission of the gentlest and most benevolent Being, who had ever appeared among the children of men. It is only reasonable to expect, that the character of the miracles should, in some degree, harmonize with the character of the messenger; and that he, who professed to have come upon an errand of mercy, should be furnished with such proofs of his mission, as would argue not merely the power of God, but his love to men, and his disposition to promote their welfare. And such we find in reality to have been the case. He who came to save his people from the disease and death of the soul, thought fit by his miracles to ward off death and disease from their bodies. It was not in the fire, nor in the earthquake, that God made his presence and his power manifest; it was in the still small voice of compassion. Among so many exertions of a supernatural energy, there was scarcely one that did not minister relief to the afflicted. To multiply the loaves and fishes, was an act of power: but to do this in behalf of a famishing multitude, who found themselves at nightfall without food in the wilderness, was an act of bountiful compassion. To restore life to a dead man, was an act of power: but to give back her only son to the widow, was an act of merciful loving-

kindness. Well might the by-standers exclaim—
“It was never so seen in Israel.” Although it was expected that the miracles which Messiah should work would surpass those of the ancient prophets, yet the question was asked,—“When Christ cometh will he do more miracles than this man hath done?”—
It was on this account that our Lord pronounced their sin in rejecting him to be of the deepest dye. “If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin. But now they have both seen and hated both me and my Father.”⁴ Not that the mitigation of human suffering was the *sole* purpose for which the laws of nature were suspended :—the effects were not extensive enough to warrant any such supposition as this. When compared with what is often suffered from a war, a famine, or a pestilence, all the miseries alleviated by the miracles of Jesus were perhaps trifling. But as the natural effect of the exercise of a miraculous power must always be to excite fear, and wonder, and curiosity, and to call men’s attention to the person who exercises it; so the *manner* in which this miraculous power was exercised by Jesus, stamped upon him a character of benevolence, in perfect harmony with the doctrine he taught, and the commission he laid claim to. Surely the works of evil spirits would be like themselves, malicious, im-

⁴ John xv. 24.

pure, and cruel. To suppose that they would be permitted to work such miracles as those in question for the mere purpose of trial, would be hard indeed to reconcile with the idea of a just and merciful Creator. For who would be so likely to be deceived thereby, as the compassionate and pure of heart ;—who so likely to disregard them, as the sensual and the selfish ? That a trial should thus be proposed, a delusion thus permitted, from which the bad, by reason of their depravity, would escape ; and to which the good, in proportion to their goodness, would be the more likely to succumb ; is so repugnant to our ideas of a merciful Providence, as to be utterly incredible.

Besides this, it will be agreed that the impostor, who is endeavouring to delude mankind by false miracles, must use perpetual vigilance in order to guard against discovery ; while the worker of miracles, who is in truth a messenger from God, will desire that they may be tried by the severest scrutiny. And were not the miracles of Jesus performed in the most open and fearless manner, before men fully competent to detect such a delusion if it had existed, and who would have rejoiced in the exposure ? As every successive miracle in that glorious catalogue was exhibited, so did the probability of imposture dwindle away and vanish. One single act might fairly enough be questioned, especially by those who had not been spectators of it. But if

the professed messenger from heaven has a power constantly abiding in him—a power, too, which he not only exercises himself, but communicates when he pleases to others—the proofs of a Divine original are multiplied, and become irresistible. If such works as the Christian miracles be performed by different persons, at different times, and in different places, in support of the same cause, they afford the strongest possible evidence of its truth. It is incredible that the Almighty should permit so systematic a contrivance for the deception of mankind by evil spirits.

So far, then, as we are able to judge from the character of the miracles themselves, every thing was in favour of their being in reality what they were professed to be, conclusive evidence of a Divine commission. To suppose that a confederacy with evil spirits could have existed on the part of such a body of men as our blessed Saviour and his disciples, for the purpose of deluding the world by the exhibition of such miracles as those which they performed, is incredible. From their education, their employments, and their general character, they were the most unlikely persons in the world to co-operate in such an imposture, or to keep it secret. One of them deserted the cause, and betrayed his Master. If, then, there had been any collusion with evil spirits, would not this man have rejoiced in making a public exposure of it? Why did he not adopt that obvious method of rebutting the imputation of

treacherous ingratitude, and justify himself in delivering up an impostor to the righteous indignation of those whom he had attempted to delude? So far, however, was this from being the case, that when Jesus was condemned, the repentant traitor came back to his employers with the price of his treachery, confessing that he had betrayed innocent blood. Had there been any plausible ground for the charge, how can we account for the Roman governor coming forward in public to declare, that he found no fault in him "touching those things whereof he was accused?" The Roman law, equally with the law of Moses, condemned the practice of magic: and neither the Roman governor nor the Jewish rulers would have found so much difficulty as they did, in devising a legal excuse for condemning him to death, if there had been the slightest real evidence of a confederacy with evil spirits.—Unable, then, to discover in the miracles themselves any thing to warrant such an imputation, we proceed to the doctrines propounded on the authority of the miracles, with a view to ascertain their bearing upon the point in question. Was there, then, in the *doctrines* any thing to countenance the notion that they were the result of a confederacy with evil spirits?

We are met at the outset by a protest against this principle of judging of the miracles by the doctrine. We are told that our blessed Lord himself made use of several expressions which seem to set up the

authority of miracles as exclusive and paramount. He says, for instance, "If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. But I have greater witness than that of John : for the *works* which the Father has given me to finish, the same *works* that I do, bear witness of me that the Father hath sent me."⁵ And again, "If I had not done among them the *works* that no other man did, they had not had sin."⁶ And in another place, "If I do not the *works* of my Father, believe me not: but if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the *works*; that ye may know and believe that the Father is in me, and I in him."⁷ Why are we called upon to suspend our acquiescence in miracles as the proof of a Divine mission, until we have tested the doctrine, when in each of these passages the miracles *alone* seem to be brought forward by our blessed Lord himself, as a sufficient proof of his Divine authority and mission?

It will be found, on further inquiry, that notwithstanding the stress which our Lord may seem on particular occasions to have laid upon his miracles, and which,—inasmuch as without miracles there can be no revelation,—is only what we should be prepared to expect; in other passages he makes a direct appeal to his word, and the doctrines which he taught. These he represents to be of such a nature as to confirm the evidence of his mission. Thus he urges as

⁵ John v. 31.⁶ Ibid. xv. 24.⁷ Ibid. x. 38.

a reason that men should love and believe in him, that "the *word* which you hear, is not mine, but the Father's which sent me."⁸ In another place he says that "the word" will judge all who "receive it not;"—inasmuch as "I have not spoken of myself, but the Father that sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak."⁹ In cautioning them against false prophets, he says, "Ye shall know them by their fruits."¹⁰ St. John enjoins the church "not to believe every spirit, but to try the spirits, whether they are of God."¹¹ And again he says, "If any man come unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not."¹² And some, at least, of those who heard our Lord's discourses, argued rightly when they said in the text,—“these are not the words of one that hath a devil.” But to mention no more, his answer to the Jews, who said that he cast out devils by Beelzebub the chief of devils, established the point beyond contradiction. His argument was, that if he through the power of the devil cast out devils, the kingdom of Satan was divided against itself, and therefore could not stand. But the mere fact of a person casting out devils by the power of the devil, was no evidence that Satan was divided against himself. If an emissary of Satan should be permitted to cast out devils, it would not

⁸ John xiv. 24.⁹ John xii. 49.¹⁰ Matt. vii. 16.¹¹ 1 John iv. 1.¹² 2 John 10.

shake the stability of Satan ; but rather confirm it by giving strength to imposture. But when one who inculcates good and virtuous doctrines, such as will destroy the works of the devil, and bring men to the knowledge and worship of the true God, appeals to miracles as the evidence of his mission, and among others to the casting out of devils; it is clear that if such miracles were wrought by the aid of Satan, Satan would in that case be divided against himself, and his kingdom brought to destruction.

We may proceed then, at once, to the point which it is proposed to establish ; namely, that the Jews, allowing as they did that a superhuman power was exercised, and seeing that it was exercised in deeds of benevolence, in strict accordance with our notions of the Creator's attributes, were not justified in ascribing that power to an evil origin, unless in the doctrine propounded on the strength of those miracles there was something clearly incredible, or incompatible with what had previously been promulgated, on at least equal authority.¹³

For if *both* the parts of which a revelation consists,—that is, the miracles, and also the doctrine,—be of unquestionable authority, the revelation must necessarily be believed. But if in the doctrine there be something at variance with truth and virtue;—if

¹³ See Penrose on the Evidence of the Scripture miracles.—Also a Review of that work by the Rev. C. W. Le Bas, p. 30.

reason, the faculty which God has given us for the purpose of examining what is propounded,—or if the principles of natural religion, by which all reasonings upon Divine revelation must necessarily be governed,—if either of these pronounce the doctrine to be inadmissible, the revelation must be rejected in spite of the miracles. We have no other way to determine what is worthy of God, and fit to be received as a revelation from Him, but by the instinctive perception we have of His moral attributes: and our reliance upon this, would be stronger than our conviction of the negative proposition, that none but He can interfere with the system of nature. If any one should tell mankind, that he had received a Divine commission to teach them that the Almighty is cruel and vindictive, or that there is no obligation to perform acts of piety, and justice, and benevolence; and should work miracles in support of his assertion; it would be allowed at once that such miracles must be ascribed to an evil agency. How far the sinful heart of man may, by the devices of Satan and the example of sinners, be estranged from the love of what is praiseworthy and excellent, it is hard to say. But if there remain one single spark of sound and virtuous principle, no one who attempts to sap the belief of these fundamental truths, or to undermine the obligation of these natural duties, how great soever may be the signs and wonders which he performs, will be received as a messenger from God.

And, again, if any one should teach a doctrine which is essentially opposed to the tenor of a former revelation, admitted and established upon sufficient authority,—that person must not be received as a messenger from God, although he may work miracles.

It is allowed, that the very supposition of a second revelation implies of necessity an addition to that which has been already granted, and, within certain limits, a change. A particular form of outward ceremonial which was adapted to the exigencies of one age or nation, may not be so well suited to another : and this without any impeachment of the original contrivance. Rites which have been long in use may be abrogated, when the reason of them has ceased : new ones may be substituted, which shall be more significant and more suitable. Any positive institutions, the value of which consists, not in their intrinsic excellence, but in the external impress of Divine authority which they bear, may be repealed without any imputation on the wisdom of the original enactment. But any attempt to disprove the truth, or to cancel the essential doctrines of a former revelation, would prove the condemnation of the messenger in the teeth of his miracles. The admission of the former involves the rejection of the latter. God cannot contradict Himself. He who ascribes the miracles of the former revelation to God, must necessarily ascribe the miracles of the latter,—if indeed they be miracles,—to evil spirits.

But if neither of these should be the case :—if the doctrine be consonant with our natural perception of what is right ; and if it be in accordance with the tenor of previous revelation :—believing, as we do, that truth, and justice, and mercy, are among the Deity's essential attributes ;—believing that He is incapable either of being deceived Himself, or of deceiving others ; we cannot suppose it consistent with the perfection of His nature, to suffer miracles, and especially such miracles as those of Jesus, to be wrought for the delusion of an innocent seeker after truth. Is there not something within us which prompts the assurance, that the error which no caution, no integrity, no wisdom, could guard against, is one to which a kind Providence will never permit us to be exposed ? Such is the constitution of our minds, that when doctrines which the conscience approves, concur with actions which the understanding pronounces to be superhuman, a weight of evidence is formed, which to the sound and fair judgment must necessarily carry conviction. And this constitution of our minds—is it not a declaration of the will of God ?

In reference, then, to the miracles of Jesus, what course ought the searcher after truth to have pursued ?

It was his duty, previous to any hasty rejection of our Lord, by the unwarrantable ascribing of His miracles to evil spirits, to examine the doctrines

which He taught; and to suspend his decision until he had ascertained whether, in those doctrines, there was any thing incredible, or at variance with the essential truths which the Almighty had revealed to his forefathers.

Supposing, then, that the Jew had pursued his course without prejudice, and simply made himself master of the substance of our Lord's teaching, what would have been the result of his inquiry? Did the doctrine contain any thing unworthy of God—any thing opposed to those conceptions which the wisest and the best men have always had of His attributes, and of the service which He may be expected to require?—If to bring the heathen from the worship of idols to the confession of One only living and true God, and to teach the Jews that He is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth;—if to inculcate a simple and sublime morality, which regulates not the actions only, but the desires of the heart;—if to teach the practice of meekness and humility, self-denial and purity, generosity, gratitude, and a readiness to forgive, together with a disposition to return blessings, and prayers, and kindnesses for execration, hatred, and wrong;—if to supply consolation, elsewhere sought in vain, to the weary and fainting sufferer;—if *this* were incompatible with any instinctive perception of virtue, then would it have been right for the inquirer to suspend his judgment. If to forbid hypocrisy and covetous-

ness, to warn men against deceit, lasciviousness, and pride, against evil thoughts and desires of the heart ; to condemn not only murder, but causeless anger, not only adultery, but all unrestrained concupiscence ;—if, in the forcible language of one of old, to assert that a man may “ stab with his tongue, and assassinate with his mind, and pollute himself with a glance ;”—if *this* be at variance with any principles of natural piety, the Jewish inquirer would have acted with proper discretion in questioning the authority of the miracles. If, in short, to enforce the practice of all that is virtuous, and to condemn every vicious propensity, by the strongest motives that can influence the human heart ;—if to enjoin the love of God in its most intense form, and the love of man in its widest extent ; crowning the whole by establishing the certainty of future rewards and punishments, according to the deeds done in the flesh ;—if *this* has any tendency to promote an evil design, or to be subservient in any way to the machinations of evil spirits ; then might the Jews with reason have set down Jesus as an impostor, and His miracles as the works of Satan. But until it can be shown that such is the case ; or that it is consistent with the views and interests of an evil spirit to promote men’s happiness, by teaching them the practice of holiness ; we must pronounce the conduct of those who ascribed our Lord’s miracles to an evil agency, to have

been marked either with an infatuated credulity, or with the most obstinate wickedness.

To believe that One, who lived in the constant practice of every virtue which He taught, in no single respect falling short of the purity, and patience, and painful self-denial, which He required from His followers ;—One, against whom even His bitterest enemies dared not utter a word of reproach ;—One who always pursued the same steady course, still consistent with Himself, never varying His doctrines to suit particular exigencies, allowing no license to sinful passions for the sake of gaining proselytes, still furthering the welfare of mankind, and asserting the honour of God, in all that He did ;—One who despised those worldly advantages which it is usually the object of an impostor to secure ; fearlessly exposing Himself to brutal insult and ignominious death, in the prosecution of His design ; and in the very moment of His mortal agony commending His spirit into the hands of God ;—to believe that such a Being as this was a hardened impostor, pretending to be a messenger from Heaven, although conscious of the falsehood of His pretensions ; and in order to confirm this claim, becoming confederate with the powers of darkness ;—surely *this* is to believe a greater improbability, than that His miracles should be real, and His commission from above. —That the heathens, who were conscious that the

prodigies of their own mythology were absurd and irrational, should attempt to throw ridicule upon our Saviour's miracles, of which their knowledge must have been at best extremely imperfect, may be accounted for. But that the Jews should admit that their ancient prophets were messengers from God, on the evidence of miracles which they never saw,—and yet affirm that the blessed Jesus wrought those miracles of which they were eyewitnesses, by an evil and malignant agency,—argues an inveteracy of prejudice which has seldom, if ever, been surpassed.

If a prophet should arise among men, and teach the *opposite* doctrines to these, we should unquestionably refuse to admit him as a messenger from God, though he were supported by miracles. But such teaching and such a life as that which has been described, instead of diminishing the weight and authority of miracles, ought to have increased it; and instead of suggesting doubts, ought to have established certainty. It ought to have convinced them that all He asserted was true, even though He declared Himself to be the SON OF GOD.

LECTURE IV.

MATTHEW XII. 31.

ALL MANNER OF SIN AND BLASPHEMY SHALL BE FORGIVEN UNTO MEN, BUT THE BLASPHEMY AGAINST THE HOLY GHOST SHALL NOT BE FORGIVEN UNTO MEN.

SO far as we have advanced in our examination of our blessed Saviour's miracles, and of the doctrines which He taught in virtue of the commission grounded upon those miracles, every thing conspires to set forth the impiety of those who could accuse Him of being confederate with evil spirits.

One other point, however, remains to be noticed. Perhaps the Jew might argue, that the teaching of Jesus had a tendency to subvert the Law and Dispensation of Moses. For, if this was the case, and if the Law of Moses could not be altered or repealed without derogating from the perfection of the Creator's attributes, then, by the principles which we have laid down, the Jew was right in his refusal to admit the revelation as proceeding from God.

There is no doubt, in fact, that upon this ground the principal opposition to our Lord was founded. They were constantly endeavouring to "entangle Him in His talk;"—to surprise Him in the utterance of some sentiment on which they might build this accusation against Him. They caught at a figurative expression which He made use of, in allusion to His own future resurrection, and they construed it into a threat that He would "destroy the temple:" and this saying was so carefully treasured up in their memories, that they taunted Him with it, even when He was hanging upon the cross.¹ They attempted to excite the popular indignation against Him as a traducer of Abraham:² they reviled Him as a Samaritan and a schismatic.³ The plucking of ears of corn, and the healing of diseases, on the Sabbath, were gravely urged as a violation of the commandment. And it was in reply to such charges that He assured them in His sermon on the Mount, that He was not come "to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them."⁴ A declaration which has in fact been frequently brought forward by the Jews, for the purpose of arguing, that His words and His actions were at variance with each other. They assert, that at the very time when He was abrogating so many ceremonies, and sacrifices, and distinctions of meat, so many purifications

¹ Matt. xxvii. 40.

² John viii. 53.

³ John viii. 48.

⁴ Matt. v. 17.

and judicial enactments, He treacherously gave out, that He was not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it.

Was there, then, in our Saviour's example and doctrine, any thing to countenance so grave an accusation ?

His own personal observance of the Mosaic ritual appears to have been extremely scrupulous : and upon this point, excepting those frivolous objections which have been alluded to, His adversaries with all their acuteness could find no charge to bring against Him. And as to the precepts which He gave to others upon this subject, it must be observed, that the external rites enjoined by Moses, relating as they did merely to the purification of the flesh, were only figurative of an inward and spiritual purification ; which so far excels the other, as the soul is more excellent than the body. This defect the doctrines of the Gospel were especially calculated to supply ; by teaching a real and substantial holiness, of which the legal purification was a mere type or shadow ; such a quality as will bring men into a closer resemblance to that good and perfect Being whom they worship. This was the sum, the scope, and the ultimate design, of the Law and the Prophets : in comparison with which, the ritual and ceremonial part of religion is spoken of, as of little moment, even by the Prophets themselves. " Behold," (says Samuel,) to obey is better than sacrifice ; and to hearken than the fat of

rams.”⁵ “To what purpose,”—says the Almighty Himself, speaking by the mouth of Isaiah,—“to what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?—Bring no more vain oblations.—Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth.—Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doing from before mine eyes: cease to do evil, learn to do well: seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”⁶ Although the Jew appeared to have forgotten the very existence of such precepts as these, the writings of the ancient prophets abound with them. “Where-with shall I come before the Lord”—says the inquirer spoken of by Micah,—“shall I come before Him with burnt offerings? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, and with ten thousand rivers of oil? He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good. And what doth the Lord require of thee; but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”⁷ Let the substance of our Lord’s teaching be compared with these precepts, and their identity will at once be apparent. If he forbade any thing which the Law of Moses permitted, as in the cases of retaliation and divorce; and if he commanded any thing which Moses had not insisted upon, as the rendering of good for evil, and the

⁵ 1 Sam. xv. 22.

⁶ Isaiah l. 11—17.

⁷ Micah vi. 6—8.

loving our enemies ; it was merely the carrying out of the same principle to a higher degree of perfection. In the place of shadows, He gave substance and reality.

It was not inconsistent with the Divine wisdom, to make additions to the revelation given to Adam and the Patriarchs ;—why then should it be deemed so, to make additions to the Law of Moses ? It was God's pleasure to temper His revelation according to the age and growth of His people ; feeding them with a ritual and ceremonial law, as with "milk," in their infancy ; training them up by degrees in the nurture of the Prophets ; and at last giving them the "strong meat" contained in the Gospel of His Son. It was true, then, that Jesus came, "not to destroy, but to fulfil." He destroyed, indeed, that which was merely suited to men's carnal apprehension, and admitted in pity to their ignorance ; but all the inward and spiritual part of the Law, He fulfilled. If the Jew had only referred to his own Scriptures, he would have found that the strictness of the Law had already on several occasions been dispensed with, even under the Dispensation of Moses. The rite of circumcision was discontinued during the wanderings in the desert ;—David, "when he was a hungred," ate of the shew-bread ;—and in the reign of Hezekiah, a multitude of the people were permitted to eat the passover without the previous legal purification. The prayer of Hezekiah on this occasion is worthy of especial notice. We read,

that Hezekiah prayed for the people, saying, "The good Lord pardon every one, that prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers; though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary."⁸ And we read, that "the Lord hearkened to Hezekiah, and healed the people." And the Almighty expressly declared his willingness on all occasions to dispense with the ritual and ceremonial law, if it should stand in competition with the weightier precepts of internal morality; saying, that He desired "mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings;"⁹—a passage to which our Saviour expressly referred, when He was accused of violating the ordinance of the Sabbath.¹⁰

In short, if those objectors had only studied their own Scriptures with a docile and unprejudiced mind, they would have discovered that the Law was nothing more than "a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ." It was ordained by unerring wisdom for the purpose of maintaining among them the knowledge of the true and only God, and of cherishing the persuasion of the efficacy of an expiatory sacrifice, until the rising of a brighter day-spring from on high. How could it be assumed that God's worship was to be confined for ever to His temple at Jerusalem, and to the Priesthood of Aaron; when the voice of prophecy declared, that "all nations of the earth" should come

⁸ 2 Chron. xxx. 18.⁹ Hosea, vi. 6.¹⁰ Matt. xii. 7.

to serve Him,¹¹ and that a Priesthood after another order should be established, even “the order of Melchizedek?”¹² How could such a notion be retained, when it was foretold that both “city and sanctuary” were to be destroyed; both “sacrifice and oblation” caused to cease?¹³ How could it be affirmed that the covenant with Moses should remain for ever; when God Himself had declared that He would make “a *new* covenant, not according to the covenant made with their fathers?”¹⁴ How could it be held that Moses was to be their only lawgiver, and the obligation of his law to endure for ever; when another “like unto” Moses was promised by that Prophet himself,¹⁵—One before whom “kings should bow down, and nations do Him service.”¹⁶ And with respect to this promised Lawgiver, it was expressly foretold by Daniel, that He should “bring in everlasting righteousness,”¹⁷—or in other words, that He should confirm and elucidate those laws of holiness, which are of indispensable and eternal obligation.

The more seriously we reflect upon the character both of the miracles and the doctrine, the more shall we be appalled by the daring impiety, which charged their Divine Author with having leagued with the

¹¹ Psa. lxxii. 11, and elsewhere.

¹³ Dan. ix. 26.

¹⁵ Deut. xviii. 15.

¹⁷ Dan. ix. 24.

¹² Psa. cx. 4.

¹⁴ Jer. xxxi. 31.

¹⁶ Psa. lxxii. 11.

powers of evil. Our minds will be fully prepared for the sentence which pronounced it to be beyond reach of pardon. "All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."¹⁸ All the reproach and insult which was cast upon the Saviour's person,—whether in reference to the meanness of His extraction, or the place of His nativity, or the class of persons with whom He associated,—might be forgiven. Though they taunted Him with being the son of a carpenter—though they sneered at Him as the Prophet who came out of Galilee—though they reviled Him as a glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners,—all these calumnies, inasmuch as they cast no imputation upon the Divine power by which He wrought His miracles, were declared to be within the reach of pardon. But the blasphemy, which deliberately ascribed to the power of Satan, that which was wrought by the Spirit of God, would not be forgiven either in this world, or in the world to come. Because they said—"He hath an unclean spirit"¹⁹—that is, because they charged Him with being a ma-

¹⁸ Matt. xii. 31, 32.

¹⁹ Mark, iii. 30.

gician, and employing a familiar spirit to do the works of wonder and mercy which were done by the Spirit of God, they were guilty of a sin beyond even the possibility of remedy. For, if another messenger should be sent from heaven to convince the blasphemer of his criminality, no stronger testimony could be given than that of miracles: and if, when miracles are wrought, he imputes them to the power of Satan, he defeats thereby the last and utmost means which God has ever yet vouchsafed to employ for the recovery of sinners. If he doubted only, and denied, there might be hope for him: but if he opposes the doctrine, and reviles the evidence, then he "neither enters into the kingdom of heaven himself, nor suffers them that are entering to go in." His temper excludes him from the softening influence of Divine grace; and the Spirit, whom he hath so foully blasphemed, will strive with him no longer.

Inasmuch, then, as the Jew could not pretend to have discovered in our Saviour's doctrine any thing in itself inadmissible, nor any thing at variance with the essential truths of that revelation which had been granted to his forefathers, he was bound to receive the miracles as evidence of a Divine mission: it being premised that the character of the miracles themselves was in strict accordance with our notions of the Creator's attributes.

We are met, however, by a protest against this mode of reasoning on the subject. We are accused

of arguing in a circle ; of attempting to prove, in the first place, the doctrine by the miracles, and afterwards the miracles by the doctrine.

That there are certain doctrines,—those, for instance, which would encourage cruelty, or any other flagrant vice,—which could not by any miracles whatever be proved to come from God, will easily be granted. Supposing, then, that we make a division or classification of doctrines. There might be some, which would be essentially true in their nature ; being plainly enjoined by our moral sense. Others might be indifferent ; commanding no necessary obedience in themselves. And others, again, in their nature absolutely false ; involving absurdities and contradictions, or tending to the encouragement of vice. To the first of these classes, miracles can attach no greater evidence than that which they already possess. The second can exert no obligation without the evidence of miracles. And the third would not receive any degree of proof from all the miracles in the world.

Whenever, therefore, miracles are adduced as a proof of doctrines, by examining the tendency of the doctrine proposed, so as to ascertain to which of the three classes it belongs, we see at once its capability of being proved. If the doctrine be not in itself inadmissible ; and if, after due examination, we see no reason to question the fact of the miracles ; by those miracles it will be established. But if the doctrine is repugnant to our sense of right, and to our know-

ledge of God's attributes, then we are sure that in the evidence, that is, in the miracles, there is something deceptive. Applying, therefore, these principles to the doctrine and miracles of our Saviour, we shall find that a certain portion of what He taught would have been infallibly true, had He never wrought a single miracle;—although its obligation perhaps would not have been so clear to all capacities :—and that the rest of it, inasmuch as it contained nothing but what tended to the honour of God, and the welfare of mankind, was capable of being enforced by miracles : and that this part of the doctrine the miracles did so enforce, proving beyond all question that it came from God. Supposing, however, that any part of the doctrine had been in itself absurd, or contradictory, or in its tendency immoral, no miracles whatever would have been sufficient to prove it. It is evident, then, that although the nature of the doctrine be taken into consideration, before the mission is recognized as divine, we prove, nevertheless, the doctrine by the miracles, and not the miracles by the doctrine.²⁰

But now it will be asked, whether, upon so difficult and delicate a question as the credibility of a doctrine, the generality of mankind are capable of forming a judgment? Are the illiterate and ignorant, and those who have been educated in a false faith, fit persons to decide whether it is worthy of a Divine

²⁰ See Clarke's Boyle Lecture, p. 252.

interposition? Are they likely to detect a false doctrine, if it be supported by the testimony of miracles?—In the minds of a few thoughtful persons, it is possible that, according to the nature of the communication, there may be generated a disposition to admit or to reject the probability of its Divine original. But will this effect be produced upon the multitude? Supposing that a doctrine should be propounded which is favourable to men's corrupt passions; this consideration would doubtless awaken the caution and prejudice of a few good men against it:—but to the approval of the greater portion of mankind, would it not thereby be the more strongly recommended? When we consider what flagrant vices were ascribed by the heathen to their divinities, and what gross immoralities were practised by them in the ritual of their religion, even without the sanction of miracles; and when we consider, further, how often the principles of Gospel purity are treated as impracticable, and their very excellence urged against them;—how often Christians themselves endeavour to soften down the rigour of Christian precepts, and attempt to bring them nearer to the level of their own frailty;—when all this is considered, will it not be agreed that a doctrine, which should connive at the indulgence of carnal appetites, would overcome all dictates of conscience, and perceptions of innate morality; offering a temptation too strong for human nature to resist?

That the state of morals among the heathen, at the time of our Saviour's incarnation, had arrived at an awful pitch of depravity,—that the leprosy of sin had incrusted them with its loathsome humour,—and that each race of men was more corrupt than the preceding,—is an unquestionable fact. And yet, the sad and reproachful strains,²¹ in which one of their own poets,—and he, too, no very strict moralist,—has recorded it, afford a sufficient evidence in themselves that the voice of conscience was sometimes loud enough to be heard. And when we find another of their writers describing, in his indignant satire,²² the reckless and headlong career of profligacy; comparing the consciousness of secret guilt to the most exquisite tortures of the bull of Phalaris, or the sword of Damocles; and invoking upon the head of the tyrant,

²¹ *Ætas parentum, pejor avis, tulit
Nos nequiores, mox daturos
Progeniem vitiosiore.*

HORAT. 3 C. vi. 46.

²² *Magne pater Divûm, sævos punire tyrannos
Haud aliâ ratione velis, cum dira libido
Moverit ingenium ferventi tincta veneno :—
Virtutem videant, intabescantque relictâ.—
Anne magis Siculi gemuerunt æra juvenci ;
Et magis auratis pendens laquearibus ensis
Purpureas subter cervices terruit ;—Imus,
Imus præcipites—quam si sibi dicat ; et intus
Palleat infelix quod proxima nesciat uxor ?*

PERS. SAT. iii. 35—43.

as the heaviest curse that could be invented, that he should ever retain before his eyes the fair form of virtue, and waste away under the consciousness of having forsaken her ; it affords a tolerably clear proof, that although wellnigh choked by education, and example, and unrestrained indulgence, there were still some seeds of virtue lying in the neglected soil of the human heart. Although inactive, and wellnigh extinct, through want of due culture and discipline, there may still be traced that instinctive moral perception, by which man is led to approve what is good, and to condemn what is evil. As the natural eye perceives a natural beauty in the shape, and colour, and proportion of outward objects, as soon as they are presented to it ; so the inward eye distinguishes the fair and the amiable, from the foul, the odious, and the deformed. In either case, differences of opinion may occur ; but these are the exceptions which prove the rule. And among them all, there is a preponderating unanimity. The shapeless reptile will be regarded with universal loathing : the ungrateful and the cruel man will be treated with universal abhorrence. Supposing that you were to relieve an innocent person in distress ; and supposing that you were, afterwards, to inflict some grievous injury upon one who has been your benefactor ; and then coolly reflecting upon what you have done, to make a candid statement of your reflections :—most truly has it been observed, that to assert that you would be

affected in the same way towards both the actions, or that you would make no distinction between them, but approve or disapprove them equally, is a falsity too glaring to require serious confutation.²³

As the sensitiveness to pain which pervades our outward members, was intended as a law to protect them from injury ; so, in the moral sense, we have a more excellent and Divine law to warn us against the sin which may assault and hurt the soul. When man was placed in paradise, the faculties of his soul were perfect. He saw the truth of God as clearly, as with the natural eye he beheld the objects of the material creation around him : distinguishing the good from evil, as he would distinguish the light from darkness ; relishing the one, and abhorring the other. When sin entered, he fell from this perfect state into one of insensibility and ignorance. The eye became blind ; the ear became deaf ; and the soul like a maimed and distempered body. But although defaced and mutilated, there may still be traced the impress of the original and eternal image of God. Still there is left a spark of the celestial light alive among the embers.²⁴—It was to quicken and revive this dormant faculty, to raise man from this fallen and corrupted state, that the Son of God became in-

²³ Butler's Sermon upon Human Nature, p. 15.

²⁴ —'Εγκεκρυμμένος ἡμῖν σπινθήρ. BASIL.
—Exigua lucis scintillula. CALVIN.

carnate among us. The miraculous cures which He wrought upon the body, were an emblem of the renovation of the soul. And the effect of His Gospel, under the preventing and furthering grace of the Holy Spirit, is to bring the child of fallen Adam still nearer and nearer to the image in which God originally created him.

It appears, then, that although the generality of mankind are living in habits of sin, and although, even among those who profess to be treading in the footsteps of Christ, there is sometimes found a disposition to adopt a lower standard of moral purity than that which is set up in the Gospel; no one can reasonably deny the existence of a moral perception of right and wrong, sufficiently acute to prevent mankind in general from admitting doctrines as Divine, which are inconsistent with the Almighty's attributes, although they should be supported by miracles.

In fact, unless in subjects of this nature the appeal be made to the heart and conscience, in the case of a vast majority of mankind, it will be found impossible to make any appeal at all. It requires no profound knowledge of human nature to be aware, that to estimate evidence is what comparatively few are capable of; and that abstract reasoning upon religion is of little avail. What people of old had sharpened the natural keenness of their reasoning faculties with more assiduity and success than the Athenians?—And yet the only person who attempted to argue them out of

the absurdities of their polytheistic idolatry, was condemned by them to death ! It may be true, that the sober and thinking portion of their philosophers had convinced themselves of the existence and nature of One supreme and invisible God ; but they kept the truth locked up within their own bosoms. In their outward profession and worship they still went along with the multitude ; and if they acknowledged the Deity at all, it was done in secret. For, having no preternatural revelation of the Almighty's will to offer, no instructions as to the acceptable mode of worshipping Him, no expiatory sacrifices, no sprinkling of purification, no oblations of thanksgiving, no festivals to be observed in honour of the Deity, no altar nor priesthood dedicated to His service ; although they had reason on their side of the question, it was of no avail, when so many ancient associations and natural feelings were enlisted against them.

In fact, it is not upon reason exclusively, or even principally, that the religion of the majority of mankind must repose as its foundation. How rarely, even among such as are faithfully seeking after the truth, do we meet with those habits of patient and dispassionate inquiry, which the difficulty and importance of the subject demand !—How much do we see of controversy and cavilling !—How often are the speculations, which one age has received with deference, superseded and forgotten in the next !—Is there

a sect, among the many by which we are surrounded, which does not represent the tenets of every other shade of doctrine, except their own, as either unworthy of the Almighty's attributes, or at variance with the conclusions of reason? With the illiterate portion of mankind, so far as their religion is any thing more than mere habit, or confidence in others, it is by the conscience, rather than by the intellect, that the doctrines of revelation are to be estimated and received. With those who are incapable of appreciating the conclusiveness of an argument, the great governing principle must be conscience: and whenever the Almighty speaks, there is a chord in man's heart which vibrates responsively.

Many a simple-minded Christian cherishes a firm faith in the Saviour who died for him, and the Spirit by whom he is strengthened and sanctified;—many a simple-minded Christian lives and dies in this faith, undisturbed by a single doubt as to the Divine origin of the Bible in which it is contained;—without knowing, and without being able to comprehend if he did know, one jot of the evidence upon which we receive that Bible as the word of God. When told of his own sinfulness, and of the justice and purity of the Almighty, and of the intercession of the Saviour; what is it that melts his stony heart, and causes the tear to flow down his rugged cheek, but the voice of conscience bearing an irresistible testimony from within, and pronouncing the doctrine to be true? The effect

is produced, not by the mere word of him that speaketh, but by that inward process thus described by the Apostle: "The invisible things of the Creator, even His eternal power and Godhead,"—His greatness and goodness, and the rest of His essential attributes—"are clearly seen and understood from the things that are made,"²⁵—even from the law written by His own finger upon the heart of man. The effect is produced, not by presenting to him a confutation of the sophistry of Atheism,—not by attempting to convince him that he has a soul,—not by proving to him that there will be a future state of retribution,—but by simply calling upon his conscience; by appealing to that natural apprehension of good and evil which God has planted within him.

²⁵ Rom. i. 20.

LECTURE V.

MATTHEW XIII. 51.

HAVE YE UNDERSTOOD ALL THESE THINGS ?

AMONG other arguments which have been brought forward to show that the Jew was bound to admit the evidence of our Lord's miracles, and to receive Him in the Divine character to which He laid claim, I have had occasion to point out the general *tendency* and *character* of the miracles themselves, and the absence therein of any shadow of foundation for the charge of an infernal agency. It was observed, that they were something more than the mere exercise of a superhuman power. In almost every instance, they were the exercise of a superhuman power with a compassionate and beneficent intention : and as such, they afforded an intimation at least that they were wrought with the immediate co-operation of that Being, who is beneficent, as He is Almighty. They afforded a presumption, that He who wrought them, had come upon a beneficent and

compassionate errand. And they were also examples of love and compassion to be exercised by His followers towards the rest of mankind, according to their own respective, though inferior, opportunities.

And now the question presents itself, whether this was all.—Was there, or was there not, any meaning or intention in the miracles further than this? Did they, like the parables of our Lord, contain any *spiritual* sense, any *mystical* allusion? Was the outward act, besides being an exercise of supernatural authority, the type or figure of any hidden meaning? For some of those expositors, who have sought to minister to the church's edification, by bringing to light latent and spiritual truth from beneath the literal narrative of Scripture, have professed to discover it in the narrative of the miracles. The period is yet fresh in our recollection, when the Christian student found his occupation in defending these foundations of his faith against that monstrous assertion, that no human testimony, no historical evidence whatever, is sufficient to prove that the miracles were ever wrought. But now we find our attention called to the miracles, not only as proofs of Divine power, and foundations of the faith, but also, and in a more especial manner, as vehicles of hidden and spiritual instruction. So far as the fondness for mystical interpretation tends to generate a deep and awful reverence for Scripture, on the part of the theological inquirer, it must ever be a subject of joy

and congratulation :—and, so far as it kindles any new sentiments of devotion in the cold and selfish heart, it is profitable. But inasmuch as if it be used without due caution and sobriety, especially when applied to the miracles of Scripture, it *may* lead, and *has* led, to results of a very disastrous character ; I may be allowed, perhaps, to dwell for a time upon the subject, and to endeavour to point out the danger.

Into the great question between the literal and the figurative interpretation of Scripture in the abstract, it is scarcely necessary to enter. It may be sufficient to observe, that in this matter, as in many others, there is danger in each extreme. That a spiritual interpretation is to a certain extent authorized by the usage of the inspired writers themselves, cannot of course be questioned, without in some measure questioning the fact of their inspiration : nor can any faithful expositor, in the face of the Scriptures themselves, argue against its reception. By observing the great natural effect of figurative language in arresting the attention, and captivating the affections ; and by reflecting that the nature of the truths to be conveyed in Holy Writ is frequently such as to render it difficult to express them in any other way ; the prejudice against this mode of interpretation will be removed from all candid minds, and a store of spiritual truths will be opened to us, with which we should not otherwise have become acquainted.

But with respect to the *limits* within which the search for allegorical meanings ought to be confined, there has been a wide diversity of opinion. According to the fashion of the age, or according to individual temperament and local circumstances, the views taken of this question have been extremely different. On the one hand, a figurative meaning has been attached, not only to those passages in the Old Testament, which our Lord Himself and His disciples have expressly pointed out as prophetic, and to those objects which they have referred to as types ; but to every part of the Old Testament, and a considerable portion of the New. Urged on by that love of imagery which is natural to the mind, an expositor of luxuriant fancy is easily carried over the boundary lines of prudence and sobriety : and he pants for the distinction of producing an interpretation which has never been discovered before. In this case a very slight evidence, or even semblance of evidence, is deemed quite sufficient to guarantee the propounding of such interpretations, as authorized expositions of truth. It has been contended, that every thing which proceeds from God, must necessarily have a depth of spiritual meaning, like Himself, unfathomable and infinite :¹ and that any profitable meaning, which the ingenuity or the piety of

¹ Nihil vacuum, neque sine signo, apud Deum.

IRENÆUS iv. 21.

an expositor may attach to any particular passage or event, is a portion of what was originally intended. This, it is alleged, is "the Spirit which giveth life;" as by St. Paul set in opposition to the "letter which killeth." While some, on the one hand, in fearful apprehension of the evils resulting from a principle so uncertain and fallacious, have kept themselves, as they think, out of danger, by admitting a small number only of such figurative interpretations, and such as it would be unwarrantable to reject; others have discarded all spiritual interpretation whatever, professing to regard it as opposed to the rules of sound criticism, if not to the plain dictates of reason. Thus every ancient type and prophecy, every adumbration of the Messiah's office and character, on which the mind of the pious inquirer has ever been accustomed to dwell with joyful faith, is stigmatized as enthusiastic and visionary, and rejected as the offspring of mere superstition.

In examining the probability of there being a mystical meaning in our Lord's miracles, it will be our business to inquire, not so much into the prevalence of figurative language, as of figurative *actions*, in the lives of the inspired men and prophets of old.

We shall find, that metaphorical actions in general were extremely common. A custom which had originated among that imaginative people, at a period when their language, in its poverty, was insufficient

to express the sentiments and feelings of the mind, was still retained among them, even after their language had become so copious as not to require it. The simple gesture used for the ratification of an oath, is frequently alluded to in the early portions of Scripture history;² and the expressive act, which was intended as an outward manifestation of sorrow, is familiar to all. From these we come to the more special and particular instances of metaphorical action:—the rending of a garment into twelve pieces, to signify the twelve tribes;³—the pushing with horns of iron, to denote the expulsion of the Syrians;⁴—and the smiting a certain number of times upon the ground, in order to show how often Syria should be smitten.⁵ By such symbolic action the prophets were empowered to signify future events. Isaiah was commanded to walk barefoot, and uncovered; in order to show that Egypt and Ethiopia should be led into shameful captivity.⁶ Jeremiah was ordered to take a potter's earthen bottle, and to break it in pieces before the ancients of the people; that they might understand that the Lord would break the city and its commonwealth, “as one breaketh a potter's vessel that cannot be made whole again.”⁷ He put a yoke upon his neck; in order to signify the dominion which Babylon would acquire over Jeru-

² Gen. xxiv. 2.

⁴ 1 Kings xxii. 11.

⁶ Isaiah xx. 2.

³ 1 Kings xi. 30.

⁵ 2 Kings xiii. 18.

⁷ Jer. xix. 1.

salem, if his advice were rejected :⁸ and he bound up a stone with the book of his prophecy, and cast it into the Euphrates, to show Babylon's final destruction ;—"Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise from the evil that I will bring upon her."⁹ Ezekiel was ordered to delineate the city upon a tile ; and to prefigure what was about to befall it, by building a fort against it, raising a mound, and setting around it a camp with battering rams. This mimic siege was to be prolonged for the space of forty-three days ; during which time he was to eat and drink by measure, to signify the extremity of the famine : and by certain other symbolical acts, he was to show them that a third part of the inhabitants should die with the famine and the pestilence, a third should fall by the sword, and a third should be scattered to the winds.¹⁰ He was also directed to prepare his stuff for removing ; and to go forth with it at even in the sight of the people, as they who go forth into captivity : and having dug through the wall in their sight, to carry his burden out upon his shoulders in the twilight, with his face covered, that he might not see the ground.¹¹—Such was the symbolical language of the prophets ; a kind of imagery which all must carefully study, who would attain to a thorough comprehension of the depth, and force, and sublimity of

⁸ Jer. xxvii. 2.

⁹ Jer. li. 60.

¹⁰ Ezek. iv. and v.

¹¹ Ezek. xii. 3.

their writings. In fact, it has justly been designated as "almost a science in itself."¹²

And if we proceed to examine the life of our blessed Saviour, we shall find that He, also, made use of certain significant actions, with the obvious and declared intention of adding expressiveness and force to His words. When He was inculcating upon His disciples the practice of humility, for instance,—“He called a little child unto Him, and set him in the midst of them.”¹³ When He laboured to inspire them with a readiness to make personal sacrifices for the good of others, He girded Himself with a towel, and washed their feet.¹⁴ It is argued, then, that since our Lord has left unquestionable instances of this symbolical mode of action, in the cases which we have quoted, we may presume that in the *miracles* also,—that is, in the circumstances under which they were performed, and the mode of action which He adopted in performing them,—there may probably be the same kind of spiritual and hidden meaning.

It is alleged, too, that in the performance of some of His miraculous cures, our Lord actually made use of certain outward acts and gestures, which we cannot, without presumption, deny to be symbolical. When He was about to work a miracle in behalf of the mother of Peter's wife, who was sick of a fever,—and also

¹² Van Mildert: Bampton Lecture, p. 240.

¹³ Matt. xviii. 2.

¹⁴ John xiii. 4.

in behalf of the daughter of Jairus, who was dead,—He took each of these persons by the hand. In the act of giving sight to a man who was born blind, He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and anointed his eyes therewith ; and bade him “go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” And in several instances, in the miracles themselves an ulterior meaning seems to be intimated ; either by words which our Lord Himself made use of on the occasion, or by their correspondence with other circumstances mentioned or alluded to by Him, the allegorical meaning of which is unquestionable. When we find, for instance, that a certain fig-tree, upon which our Lord sought in vain for fruit, was condemned by Him for its unproductive uselessness ; and, by an exercise of his miraculous power, withered and dried up even to the roots :¹⁵—and when we find, in a certain parable, the mention of a fig-tree, which, when the owner came and sought fruit upon it, and found none, was sentenced to be cut down, that it might no longer cumber the ground :¹⁶—and when we are instructed, that in the *latter* there was avowedly an ulterior and spiritual meaning ; it is suggested, that in the *former* there must have been a spiritual meaning also. This conclusion would seem to be confirmed, by a reference to the tenor of the two parables which our Lord delivered immediately after—

¹⁵ Matt. xxi. 19.

¹⁶ Luke xiii. 7.

wards ;¹⁷ and still more, by an important declaration, that the exclusive privileges which the Jewish nation had so long enjoyed, would be taken away from them, and given to a nation “ bringing forth the *fruits* thereof.”¹⁸

Again, when our Lord fed the multitude with bread in the wilderness, there was given a certain illustration of the miracle in the subsequent declaration respecting the “ bread from heaven.”¹⁹ And in the miraculous draught of fishes, Jesus intimated to Simon the future success which was to await him as “ a fisher of men.”²⁰ In the case of the man born blind, He did not proceed to perform the cure until He had given a spiritual meaning to the power by which He performed it :—“ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world ;”²¹—I give a spiritual discernment to the eyes of the mind.—And again, after the miracle had been wrought, He annexed to it a spiritual meaning when He told the Jews, that the object of His coming into the world was that the blind and ignorant—“ they which see not”—might be enlightened ; and that they “ which see, might be made blind.” In the observations which He addressed to those around Him, after casting out an evil spirit, He made an application of the state of a relapsed demoniac to the condition of

¹⁷ Matt. xxi. 28 and 33.

¹⁸ Matt. xxi. 43.

¹⁹ John vi. 32.

²⁰ Luke v. 10.

²¹ John ix. 5.

the Jews; intimating that their last state was "worse than the first."²² And lastly, when He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead, He made a direct allusion to that future exertion of Divine power at the last day; when, in like manner, He will call forth all mankind to appear before Him. "I am"—He said—"the resurrection and the life."²³

From these instances of symbolical meaning avowedly attached to the miracles, it is inferred, that in others of them, although performed without any declaration of such meaning, it may, nevertheless, lie hid. In fact, an imaginative mind may easily arrive at a persuasion, that many of our Lord's miracles are in some degree *prophetical*: emblems of His designs, and visible representations of the invisible benefits which He was about to confer. When He cast out evil spirits, for instance, did He not seem to prefigure His intention to destroy the empire of the prince of evil spirits, and to remove the effects of Adam's curse? Thus, also, when His disciples told Him that even the devils were subject to them, He spoke of Satan's fall "like lightning from heaven;" and intimated that a similar downfall awaited his dominion upon earth. At all events, by repeatedly, professedly, and publicly ejecting those evil spirits, He nullified the imputation of any confederacy with them in the performance of His other miracles.—If

²² Matt. xii. 45.

²³ John xi. 25.

we find that in the early ages of the Church, certain heretics arose, who condemned the use of wine, and forbade marriage; crying up the importance of celibacy, and recommending austerities of the body:—and if, again, we find that the first miracle which Jesus wrought, was at a festive entertainment; and that this festive entertainment was on the occasion of a marriage; and that the object of the miracle was to supply the lack of wine in the needy household where He was a guest:—and if, again, we find this miracle recorded by only one of the Evangelists; that one writing his Gospel at a period when the erroneous notions which we have alluded to, were already adopted and propagated:—who will venture to say that the miracle was not wrought in anticipation of those foolish errors, and recorded for the express warning of such as entertained them?

Jesus came into the world to “destroy the works of the devil:” the worst of which are those which take place upon the soul. These, however, cannot be apprehended by the bodily faculties, inasmuch as the soul is invisible. Whenever we have occasion to speak of the faculties of the soul, we are forced to borrow our words from the faculties of the body:²⁴ and the evils and distempers of the soul, in like manner, we are wont to represent by the evils and distempers of the body. If the body had not fallen

²⁴ See Jones on the Figurative Language of Scripture, p. 210.

into infirmity along with the soul, we should not have been able to understand the soul's disorders. But now, by comparing the state of the body, when in perfect health, with the state of the same body when oppressed with disease, we may form some idea of the effects of sin upon the soul. Like a body maimed and distempered, so is the soul in its state of degeneracy and corruption. The eyes of the soul are blind, its ears are deaf, its tongue is dumb, its feet are lame; and it is throughout infected with foul disorders. When He, therefore, who was the great Physician of the soul, exercised a miraculous power of healing upon those who were diseased in the body,—the deaf, the dumb, the maimed, the infirm, and the leper;—does it not appear as if His intention was to prefigure the cure of spiritual diseases, the leprosy of sin, the various ailments and infirmities of the soul? When the light of day was for the first time poured upon the sightless eyeballs of the man who was born blind, it was a miracle well suited to the character and office of Him who wrought it, and who announced Himself on this very occasion as the “light of the world.”²⁵

And as He cured all bodily diseases, so He overcame that which is the consummation of them all, even death; signifying, as it were, His final victory

²⁵ John ix. 5.

over that which is the consummation of all spiritual disorders, even spiritual death. In the restoration of a dead *body* to life, is there not a visible emblem of the renovation of a *soul*, dead in trespasses?

It is recorded, that some of His miracles were wrought upon *strangers* and *aliens*; which might seem to indicate that the spiritual blessings which He had to confer, would not be confined to Israel alone. And when those strangers showed a higher degree of faith and gratitude than the Jews, did it not seem intended to show beforehand, that the Gentiles would surpass the Jews in their readiness to embrace the Gospel? We find Him, indeed, expressly declaring, in immediate connexion with the commendation which He bestowed upon the faith of the Gentile centurion, that—"many shall come from the East, and from the West, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven: but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out." On several occasions we find His miraculous power exerted upon persons *at a distance*, whom He neither visited nor saw: which may seem to intimate that spiritual diseases should, in like manner, be removed at a distance; and that His Gospel should convert and save those who had never seen His bodily presence upon earth.

It has been observed by a writer of the last century, a man of deep research, and one by no means

addicted to visionary speculations,²⁶ that, in the miraculous draught of fishes, which took place when our Lord met His disciples a short time before His ascension, the *number* of them is recorded with a preciseness which cannot have been without its meaning.²⁷ And, having ascertained from sufficient authority,²⁸ that it was the exact number of the kinds of fishes known to the naturalists of the age; he asks, whether it does not appear like an indication that persons of all nations and conditions should be enclosed in that net of the Gospel, which these “fishers of men” were shortly about to cast?

When we see the Saviour rebuking the winds and the waves, we may take it as an emblem of His power to quell the madness of the people, “so furiously raging together:”—we recognize the authority of that Being, who alone “stilleth the raging of the sea, and the noise of the waves thereof, and the tumult of the people.” And when He walks upon the sea, it may be received as a personification of His Gospel, winning its way over the ocean to the uttermost parts of the earth.

When we find, that at the moment of His expiring upon the cross, the veil of the temple, which fenced off the Holy of Holies from the less sacred parts of

²⁶ Jortin: Remarks on Ecclesiastical History, vol. ii. p. 21. The observation seems to have been made previously by Basnage.

²⁷ John xxi. 11.

²⁸ Oppian.

the edifice, was miraculously rent in twain,—laying open thereby that sanctuary which the Law allowed no one to enter but the high priest, and him only once in the year, with the blood of the sin offering,—do we not discern a prefiguring of the abolition of that ritual Law,—a breaking down of the wall of partition,—and the effecting of an entrance for all believers into the sanctuary of heaven by the blood of Jesus, which was poured out at that moment upon Mount Calvary? And has not St. Paul declared, in more than one passage of his Epistles, that the great miracle of the Resurrection was, in some measure, figurative of the Christian's rising up from the waters of baptism, to walk “in newness of life?”²⁹

Besides this we are told, that in ancient prophecy, that is, in the portions of it relating expressly to the miracles, it is rather the spiritual blessings to be conferred by the Gospel, than the temporal effects of the miracles upon which it is founded, which seem to be predicted. When Isaiah, for instance, describes the conversion of the Gentiles, he speaks of it as a blossoming of roses in a desert, a sound of joy and singing in a lonely wilderness:—“the eyes of the blind”—he proceeds to say—“shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; the lame man shall leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing.”³⁰ Inasmuch, then, as the former

²⁹ Rom. vi. 4; Col. ii. 12.

³⁰ Isaiah xxxv. 6.

part of this prediction is obviously and avowedly figurative, it is suggested that we cannot, without inconsistency, refuse to admit a figurative sense in the latter part of it also. In other words, that the miracles of giving sight to the blind, and opening the ears of the deaf, and making the lame man walk, though doubtless to be performed in the letter,—as indeed they were,—were signs also of the blessings of that spiritual salvation, which it was the Messiah's mission to convey.

I have thus given a brief statement of the arguments which are assigned for the applying of the principle of spiritual interpretation, in a cautious and modified form, to some of our blessed Saviour's miracles. So apt and precise is the coincidence with important events which afterwards came to light, as to make men pause before they assert that such coincidence was, in all instances, accidental. And although there be no direct evidence of the fact, it is presumed that these miracles, besides being acts of supernatural power, and evidence of the Divine mission of Him who wrought them, were intended to convey such figurative meanings to the mind of the faithful inquirer in aftertimes.

But if, in general, the use of allegorical interpretation as applied to Scripture narrations, be fraught with danger; how much is that danger increased when it is applied to the narrative of miracles!—The dispensation of Moses was, itself, only a shadow:

and therefore that in the miracles of *that* dispensation,—in the manna that came down for the hungry, the rock that was smitten for the thirsty, and the serpent that saved from death,—there should be something shadowy and figurative, we are prepared to expect. But let us beware, lest in allegorizing the dispensation and miracles of Jesus, we seem to turn the substance itself into a shadow. In venturing to lay down certain rules for our guidance in the matter, which will be done on a future occasion, most gladly shall I put myself under the directions of one, to whose authority every sober-minded inquirer will submit with reverence; one who, although no blind admirer of antiquity, is always less desirous to advance a position or precept on his own responsibility, than to seek for, and combine, and embody the opinions of the wisest and soundest of those who have gone before.

LECTURE VI.

2 TIMOTHY, IV. 4.

AND THEY SHALL TURN AWAY THEIR EARS FROM THE TRUTH,
AND SHALL BE TURNED UNTO FABLES.

IN proceeding with our inquiry into the intention and effect of our Lord's miracles, it was proposed in the last Lecture, that we should discuss the question, whether it is probable that there lies hid in those miracles any mystical and spiritual meaning. After pointing out instances of the prevalence of metaphorical action among the Jews in general, we observed that our blessed Lord Himself, besides making use of it in matters of less importance, employed it on several occasions in the performance of His miracles. We then remarked, that in some of the miracles,—as, for instance, in that of the barren fig-tree, the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness, and the abundant draught of fishes,—our Lord expressly signified the existence of an inner and spiritual sense. And having shown the facility with which an imaginative mind may discover traces of what may be

designated a prophetic meaning in some of the other miracles; we proposed that certain rules should be laid down for the guidance of such as may turn their steps into a path so beset with difficulty. For, while some expositors would scarcely allow that there exists any spiritual meaning at all, even in the three miracles already alluded to; others would take them as merely *specimens* of what this mode of interpretation may be made to produce. The former would urge us to repudiate many figurative and prophetic intimations, because they are not expressly accredited as such by the inspired writers; and the latter would inundate the field of biblical research with many visionary lucubrations, which certainly are not "profitable for doctrine," if, indeed, they be harmless.

It is agreed by all judicious writers upon the subject, that, before any figurative or mystical meaning is assigned to any passage in the narrative of Scripture, there must be produced some urgent cause for deserting the letter,—amounting almost to necessity. If, for instance, the literal meaning of the words is such as would be derogatory to the Divine perfections, as is the case when bodily organs or human passions are ascribed to the Almighty:—if, on the other hand, the expressions are so elevated and figurative in their character, when applied in the literal sense, as to amount to absurdity and extravagance:—or if, again, the figurative interpretation be so obvious in its coincidence with another subsequent

event, as to strike conviction into the mind at once ; —in all these cases ; in addition, of course, to those in which the figurative meaning is asserted, or alluded to, by the inspired writers themselves ; the internal evidence of Scripture requires that it be adopted.

Having determined, then, that a figurative interpretation is what we are fully authorized to seek for, and in some cases obliged to admit, we now come to the question,—how is that interpretation to be regulated ? And here it may be laid down as an incontrovertible maxim, that due regard must be had to the tenor of all other passages, of which the interpretation is already fixed upon undisputed authority. No fundamental article of faith, no necessary rule of life, can be supposed to depend upon texts which are doubtful or obscure. We must not venture, therefore, to interpret any figurative passage in a sense which cannot be reconciled with truths elsewhere expressed with more clearness. If a metaphorical interpretation be applied at all, it must be so applied as to elucidate the subject, not to embarrass it. It must not be sought for in matters of trifling moment ; nor must it, under any circumstances, be made the paramount subject of investigation.¹

In applying these rules to the case of the miracles, it is evident, in the first place, that no figurative

¹ See Van Mildert, Bampton Lect. p. 251.

interpretation of any of those miracles ought to be admitted, which is not so obvious as to strike the attention of every observer ; unless an ulterior meaning be pointed out by Holy Writ itself : and, in the next place, that it must not be sought for in matters of trivial importance, nor in cases where it tends rather to mystify than to elucidate. These are the precautionary maxims, which the lovers of allegory seem more particularly to have neglected.

Smitten with admiration of the more visionary among the ancient expositors, and trusting implicitly to their somewhat questionable guidance, they seem disposed to apply this mode of interpretation to every part of Scripture without distinction ; and to carry it, in all instances, as far as their ingenuity and imagination can find a path to follow. In regard to the *actions* of our blessed Saviour, (with which we are now more particularly interested,) it is asserted by a distinguished writer of the school of Alexandria, and maintained by his admirers among ourselves, that they who rest content with the outward meaning of Gospel history, — forgetting, as they go along, that in this same Jesus they live, and move, and have their being, — are labouring under the same blind delusion with those Judaizers, who profess to find neither type nor prophecy relating to Him in the Old Testament.² In virtue of that mys-

² Origen : in Joan. vi. 3.

tical union which subsists between Christ and His Church, it is inferred that every thing which happened to Him when upon earth, was a mystical token of some future fortunes of the Church. In every miracle, every speech, nay, in every movement of our blessed Lord, in every mention of time or place, in every modification of outward circumstance, this fanciful writer discovers a mystical intimation of something connected with the progress of the Gospel. The Saviour is held to be present, in a certain mystical manner, in every part of the Scripture which relates to Him.

The drift of the argument by which this mystical mode of interpretation is advocated, may be understood from the following observations. Every one,—it is remarked—who contemplates the words and works of God, must be sensible that the least of them is far too deep for human comprehension:—that as the most trivial of His commandments is exceeding broad, so the slightest of His actions *must* have “eternal and infinite associations and consequences:”—and that the words and deeds, therefore, of our blessed Saviour, being the words and deeds of God, must necessarily contain more than met the eye and the ear.³ Having been taught from His own lips, that a sparrow falleth not to the ground without Him; it is inferred that we cannot be wrong in supposing, that

³ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 119.

in His own actions, and among the rest in those miraculous actions which He performed in evidence of His Divine mission, in an especial manner, must His mysterious presence be exhibited. They must necessarily contain a heavenly and secret meaning, whether we be able to discover that meaning or not. To seek for, and recognize it, is deemed an act of considerate faith ;—to treat it lightly, and neglect it, is denounced as a fearful symptom of irreverent forgetfulness. It is suggested, that the incarnation of the Son of God may have had other objects, relative to other races and other states of being : and, indeed, that intimations are given of a change wrought by that mysterious event in heaven, as well as upon earth. It is said to be probable, therefore, that those actions and words of our Saviour, which are too profound for our comprehension, may have belonged to Him as the Lord of angels, rather than of men ; and have reference to His government of heaven, rather than of earth.⁵ And occasion is taken to laud the watchful piety of those ancient writers, who, in their interpretation of the obscurer portions of Scripture, have not forgotten this.

The effects of this mode of treating Holy Writ will be visible, it is said, in an increasing regard and reverence for it. He who knows beforehand, that the Personal Word is every where present in

⁵ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 127.

the written word, will open the sacred book with the impression that it is an awful thing to look therein. When he draws near, like Moses, to the darkness where God is, it will seem only right to prepare himself by fasting, and prayer, and self-denial.⁶ The perception of our Lord's presence through the veil of the letter, is the religious improvement of that fondness for type and allegory, which, as we have already observed, is natural to the human mind. And inasmuch as this feeling is often found the most strongly developed in those persons, whose means of acquiring literal instruction are the least favourable,—a class which unquestionably forms a great majority of mankind,—it is inferred, that the practical usefulness of such a mode of treating Holy Scripture will be of very wide extent.⁷

If this mode of arguing be allowed to prevail, it is clear that one axiom, which has usually been laid down among the characteristics and evidences of our faith,—namely, that all things necessary to salvation are revealed in plain and unequivocal terms,—must be forthwith abandoned. And, most assuredly, if the narrative of our Lord's ministry be thus assumed to contain only a *part* of the truth, the Divine promise that the Holy Spirit should guide the writers of the Gospels “into *all* truth”—a promise made in distinct

⁶ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 135.

⁷ Ibid. p. 136.

terms, and under very striking circumstances,—is rendered of none effect. And while we contemplate with awful reverence the words and actions of Jesus, as the words and actions of incarnate Deity, we are inclined to think that such reverence is rather manifested, in holding that they are of a character which would be easily understood by those fallen beings for whose use they were intended; than in asserting that they contain hidden meanings, which none can arrive at but the student and the recluse.

It is to be remembered, too, that when these words were spoken and these actions performed, the incarnate Word had laid aside the attributes of Deity; exercising the power thereof only so far, as was necessary to convince man that He came from God, and that all He asserted was true. For the long period of thirty years He lived among men, as a man, even as a servant. His words and His actions during that time were innumerable. Even in the short portion of it which was comprised in the period of His ministry, we are told, that if any one should attempt to record “every one” of the things “which Jesus did,” “the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.” And yet, according to this hypothesis, in each of these actions there was a deep and unfathomable mystery. How is it to be reconciled with our ideas of that Providence, which we believe to have superintended the preservation of them, that

so few of these mysterious treasures should have been recorded,—so vast a majority of them suffered to perish from the memory of man !

And as to the increasing reverence, with which, as it is suggested, the Scripture will be regarded by its readers, and more particularly by the plain and illiterate, in consequence of its being supposed to contain manifold and mysterious meanings;—will not such a notion tend the rather to bewilder and confound them, and make them doubt whether the Scripture contains any fixed and definite meaning at all? Will it not be likely to generate a coldness and insensibility as to the old interpretations, and a restless curiosity in seeking after new? To have discovered a meaning deeply hidden from vulgar observation, will be soothing to the inquirer's vanity; and a very slight correspondence between his own visions, and the substance of the written word, will afford him ample evidence of its truth.

One of the observations brought forward in reference to this point, seems to be peculiarly unfortunate; inasmuch as it saps the only reasonable foundation upon which this mode of interpretation might be made to rest. We are told, that even the fathers themselves are not “dogmatical,” and that they do not pertinaciously insist upon any particular interpretation as the right one:—that upon one point only they are positive,—namely, that there *are* spiritual meanings,

if we can only find them.⁸—Thus are the reins given to private judgment; and the curiosity is stimulated, which would rather have required a check. In fact, an ancient writer has made the following most pertinent remarks.⁹ “Whence is it evident,”—he asks,—“how can you *prove*,—that when you undertake to present these mystical interpretations, you are giving the same sentiments which the writers of the narrative—as you allege—had in their thoughts, but which they did not think it right to convey in words suitable to their proper sense? Another mystical interpreter may devise a sense more ingenious and probable than this which you have propounded; a third may discover another; and a fourth a different one from all the three. Thus, according to the qualifications of the different interpreters, every thing may be explained with an indefinite number of pretended expositions. For when allegories are taken from things obscure and mystical, and do not aim at any certain end, in which your notion of the subject may be immoveably fixed, every one is at liberty to affirm that his own mere conjecture is the meaning which was originally intended. From such uncertainty as this, how can you derive any thing certain?”

Although, then, this system of allegorizing the Scripture narrative may attract the attention, and

⁸ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 122.

⁹ Arnobius, Adv. Gent. l. v. p. 181.

captivate the fancy, and produce upon imaginative minds a more speedy, and forcible, and perhaps also a more permanent effect, than argumentative evidence, or logic ; it is clear that it must be introduced judiciously, and in its proper place, and without any authoritative claim to implicit acquiescence. Although when addressed to those who have already received the faith on stronger evidence, it may be attended with profit ; it will not satisfy doubts, nor convince the unbeliever. With respect to *miracles*, then, which are intended not so much for those who believe, as for those who believe not, the necessity for caution is doubly urgent. If there be peril any where, it is here. That evidence, on which, as on a sure foundation, the whole edifice of Gospel truth is made to rest, ought certainly to be as free from ambiguity, or double meaning, as possible. A learned writer in the early ages of the Church, who, in his youthful days, had been seduced into a too imaginative mode of exposition by the fashion of the times, in his maturer age acknowledges the error into which he had fallen, and compares the one mode of interpretation to the building on the sand, and the other to the building upon a rock. “ Being desirous,” he says, “ to imitate the householder in the Gospel, who brings out of his treasure things both new and old, I have intermingled with the figurative interpretations of our own writers, the facts of Jewish history ; in order that I might build upon a rock, and not

upon the sand: laying a firm and sure foundation, such as Paul, the master-builder, says that he also had laid.”⁹

We will proceed to examine an instance of this mode of interpretation, in a case which seems to be somewhat more legitimate than many others:—I mean, the development of hidden meanings from a *parable*.

After concluding the parable of the good Samaritan,—“Which of these three,”—said our Lord,—“was neighbour to him that fell among the thieves?” The lawyer answered, “He that showed mercy on him.” “Who, then,”—asks one of the fathers,¹⁰—“is neighbour to ourselves, and to all the human race?—Who is it, but Jesus Himself? To whom, rather than to Jesus, are we indebted for pity, after having suffered so much from the rulers of the darkness of this world; pierced with so many wounds,—with fears and desires, angers and sorrows, deceits and pleasures? Of these wounds, Christ is the only one who can heal us. He pours in the wine, the blood of the vine of David: He brings oil in abundance from the tender mercies of his Father: He engages angels, and authorities, and powers, to minister to our relief; and the reward which He offers to them, is the deliverance from the vanity of the world, which they

⁹ Jerome: Prolog. in Zech. p. 105.

¹⁰ Clement: De Div. Servand. § 29. p. 962.

also shall receive at the revelation of the glory of the sons of God."

Such are the ingenious allusions to the mystery of salvation, which may be derived from this simple parable. Well calculated are they to amuse, to attract, and to edify:—to amuse by their fancifulness, to attract by their aptness, and to edify by the solemn truths which they convey. It is not impossible that other imaginative minds, impressed with the same feeling, and directed to the same subject, might have hit upon the same mode of spiritual improvement. But inasmuch as these have come down to us with the sanction of an ancient expositor, we accept them with becoming deference.

Not so, however, when we proceed to the refinements and subtleties of another ancient writer upon the same subject.¹¹ For we find a strange intermingling of ordinary associations with objects of the most sacred character;—such as will minister but little to our spiritual edification. Suffice it to say, that the least important personage, and the most trivial objects in the whole narration,—namely, the host who took charge of this wounded traveller, and the two pieces of money with which he was paid by the generous Samaritan,—are made to represent the Three Persons in the ever-blessed Trinity.

From the parables of our Saviour, we proceed to

¹¹ Irenæus: lib. iii. 19, p. 244.

the allegorizing of His actions. On the occasion of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we are told by some,¹² that in the command to bring to Him the ass accustomed to the yoke, and the colt, "on which man never sat," He signified an intention to call the Gentiles into His covenant, as well as the Jews. By others¹³ we are told, that the transaction was figurative of the entry of the word of God into the soul of man:—the she-ass, loosed from her bonds by the two disciples, being intended to represent the Old Testament, expounded by two kinds of mystical interpretation: and the New Testament being signified by the young colt.

The washing of the disciples' feet is understood, not as a recommendation of humility, but as a token of the Saviour's communicating an interest in his passion to all the Saints who had gone before,—the Church of the ancient prophets and patriarchs.¹⁴ "In the last days, when the fulness of the time of liberty had arrived, the blessed Word himself, in His own person, cleansed away the filth of the daughter of Zion, washing with His own hands the feet of His disciples."—We are told, too, of spiritual meanings that lie hid under the names of places. Our Lord's wandering from place to place among the towns, and mountains, and rivers of Israel, was the moving of the God of

¹² Justin Martyr, Ambrose, and Augustin.

¹³ Origen.

¹⁴ Irenæus: in Joan. xiii. t. iv. 39.

Israel among places which had been marked out, from all ages, to be the scene of His mighty works, when He should visit the earth literally.¹⁵ It is suggested, that the outward objects to which he referred in elucidation of His doctrine,—the birds of the air, the lilies, the vine and its branches, the tares and the wheat, and even the domestic processes, and the modes of trade and husbandry to which He made allusion,—being His own outward and visible works, the preparations of His providence, and created by Him with the knowledge that He should so apply them in His ministry,—were created with an express view to such application.¹⁶

We now proceed to the allegorizing of that other division of our Lord's actions, which is more particularly connected with the present subject of our consideration :—I mean the *miracles*.

When our Lord fed the multitude with a miraculous supply of provisions in the wilderness, the number of loaves of bread which comprised the disciples' scanty store, is stated with preciseness. It is scarcely needful to observe, that this preciseness increases the effect of the narrative. To have said that *a few* loaves was all the provision they had brought with them, might have satisfied the reader that it was a quantity altogether insufficient for the

¹⁵ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 122.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 123.

purpose, without a miracle: but it would not have left upon the mind so decided an impression of the care which had been taken, to represent every thing precisely as it took place. When we are told, however, that it was specially ordained by Providence that there should be *five* loaves, in order that they might represent the *five senses*; ¹⁷ and this without the slightest intimation from the Evangelists; we may pause before we admit the interpretation. It is explained as representing the sacrifice of the whole world of sense; and especially of the dispensation of Moses, which is styled the dispensation of the senses.

We find it stated again in the narrative, that the ingredient of the loaves was barley, — a grain much used in that country among the poor. It is asserted, however, by another expositor, ¹⁸ that this also was designed and Providential. This writer, it is to be observed, although retaining the notion that it is the Mosaic dispensation which is intended, repudiates the theory of the senses, and supposes the five loaves to represent the five books of the Pentateuch. He then points out the similarity between the two. As the grain of the barley is so closely enveloped in its natural covering, as to require some trouble to arrive at it; so the letter of the Old Testament is clothed with the wrappings of carnal sacraments or tokens,

¹⁷ Clement: Strom. v. § 33.

¹⁸ Augustin: in Joan. tr. 24—5.

which must be stripped off, before you arrive at that which contains nutriment. As to the lad who bore those loaves, it is suggested, that perhaps he was the children of Israel; with no more than childish thought and childish knowledge,—bearing them, but not tasting them. There is said to be a meaning even in the attitude of those who were fed. The food was administered to them as they reclined. This was done, in order to show that the spiritual blessings bestowed by Jesus,—namely, a cleansing from sin, and a sanctification by the Spirit,—were partaken of, not merely by the living, but also by the saints departed, who are now *reclining* in the earth.²⁰ It must be observed, too, that the expositor just alluded to, who represents the five loaves to typify, not the five senses, but the five books of Moses, acknowledges in another place, that upon this point his mind is involved in some degree of doubt. Provided that we understand it to mean the Old Law, it is held to be of little consequence by which of the two interpretations we arrive at our conclusion.

Such is a specimen of the allegorical interpretation of one of our Lord's miracles. It is not otherwise than a fair specimen; for it is brought forward by the admirers of the system, in order to recommend it. We see that in their interpretation of the miracles, as well as of the rest of Scripture, the

²⁰ Irenæus: in Joan. xiii. t. iv. 39.

tone of these ancient allegorists is not "at all dogmatical." It is acknowledged, indeed, that of their own special expositions they commonly speak as doubtfully as Origen on this very place; who concludes by remarking, that those who are better able to store themselves with spiritual food, will in all likelihood be better able to interpret the narrative.²¹

One argument brought forward to support the authority and usage of mystical interpretation, at least in reference to the great objects of external nature, is the fact of there being, among ancient writers, a wonderful agreement as to their typical signification. When we find, for instance, that, by these writers in general, the sun of the visible world is declared to be an index or token of the invisible,—that the arch of the sky is a canopy, spread over the tents and dwellings of the saints;—that the flight and hovering of birds, is a token that there are powers above, who watch our proceedings in this nether world;—that the waters flowing into the sea, are the people gathered into the Church of Christ;—that the flower, and the blade of grass, are the life of man;—that weeds and tares are false principles;—when we find that these and other conventional figures, of a character more or less poetical, are constantly made use of, not by one, but by many of the ancient expositors; we are told that they could not have hit

²¹ Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 122.

upon the same set of figures independently of each other, or without special authority; and that these figures, therefore, cannot have sprung from poetical association merely, but from a common and more sacred source.²² In fact, the very poverty of some of the symbols so made use of, is adduced as an argument that they who adopted them, looked up with deference to some high authority from which they had been received: otherwise (it is argued) the more refined would have rejected them.—If, then, the uniformity of usage, in regard to the symbolical meaning of these objects in the natural world, be an argument in their favour; will not the *want* of such uniformity, in the mystical interpretation of our Lord's miracles, be an argument *against* such interpretation,—at all events, against such interpretation without some severe and judicious restraint? For, be it remembered, that in dealing with miracles, we are touching upon the very foundation of the faith; and that by such vagueness and uncertainty in the interpretation of those miracles, we may seem to be treating the substance itself as if it were nothing better than a shadow.

²² Tracts for the Times, No. 89. p. 145.

LECTURE VII.

2 TIMOTHY IV. 4.

AND THEY SHALL TURN AWAY THEIR EARS FROM THE TRUTH,
AND SHALL BE TURNED UNTO FABLES.

I SHALL now endeavour to give a brief sketch of the history of the mystical or allegorical mode of interpreting Holy Writ; tracing the probable causes from which it has sprung, and pointing out the effects which have been produced by it.

Whether we assign the authorship of it to the Christian school of expositors at Alexandria, in the third century; or trace it upwards through Philo the Jew, in the Apostolic age, to his Jewish predecessors; we shall find that its origin lay in a sort of unwillingness that Scripture should be supposed to prescribe any thing as of Divine ordinance, without such a cause as would satisfy their own minds of its propriety. Instead of setting themselves to inquire, whether the precepts and incidents, so hastily

stigmatized as trivial, might not hold, nevertheless, an important place in the great scheme of Divine economy; they chose to affix their own novel and arbitrary interpretation upon all such parts of the Inspired Volume, as to speculative minds might appear unimportant, and unworthy of their author. This learned and fanciful Jew, indeed, was bent upon bringing the word of God into conformity with the prejudices of those heathen philosophers by whom he was surrounded. Separated from the theological writers of his own creed and country; and placed among men, who explained away the marvellous traditions of their own national mythology into mere symbols of the Creator's attributes, or of the phenomena of the material universe; he was tempted to philosophize in like manner. Without entering at large into the metaphysical abstractions with which he has encumbered the truth, we may state, as an instance, that he refers the account of the Creation, not to the formation of this visible universe, but of its pattern or archetype.¹ The face of the material earth is a type of sense;—the herb and the plant thereon are whatsoever is an object of sense;—the mist rising upwards from its surface, is the symbol of intellect. The garden of Eden was not an earthly but a spiritual Paradise, adorned with the productions and delights of the intellect. The

¹ Lib. 1, sub initio.

four rivers are the four cardinal virtues: the cherubim which guarded its entrance, are the starry hemisphere;—forming a barrier between the soul and that heavenly Paradise from which it is banished. The fiery sword is the energy which regulates their movements. Cain is the contentious sophist; Abel, the humble-minded and contemplative believer: the field in which they walked, is the field of controversy. The translation of Enoch, is the conversion of the soul to God by repentance; a change of heart which is described with much beauty and eloquence. The ark of Noah is the material body; and the animals within, are its evil passions and affections. The flood is the stormy sea of man's existence,—the “waves of this troublesome world.” The egress from the ark, is the delivery of the imprisoned soul into a state of spiritual freedom. In the history of Abraham, he sees the progress of the mind from a state of darkness,—from Chaldæa, the region of vain and earthly imaginations,—to the intellectual and spiritual illumination of Canaan. A like interpretation is also affixed to the life of Jacob. The well of Haran is the fountain of science. The vision of the ladder is a representation of intellectual and incorporeal essences, some descending to animate men's bodies, and others returning to their æthereal home; being destined either to make it henceforward their constant abiding place, or to return to be held again in thralldom by the chain of matter, according to their

respective degrees of purity, and elevation in spiritual knowledge. Even the life of Joseph, although so closely connected in its literal sense with the patriotic and early associations of this Egyptian Hebrew, is nevertheless made the subject of allegorical explanation. It is represented as the political, in opposition to the natural, life. The many-coloured vest is the versatility of the statesman: and the interpretation of dreams is the unravelling of the web, which forms the great waking dream of our existence. The attempts of the sophist and the demagogue,—the magicians of Pharaoh,—to effect this, are in vain.

Such was the mode of interpretation adopted by the philosophical Hebrews, at the time when Christianity first dawned upon earth: a mode of interpretation, which, by the example of this eloquent and devout allegorist, exerted an influence upon the views of the early expositors of the Gospel; and through them, upon the theory and practice of others, in times nearer to our own. The letter of Scripture was treated as the outward and material body: the latent allegory was the spirit which gave it life.

In fact, in some of the earliest of the writings which have come down to us from the Apostolic age, we may already discover the effect of this example. In one of those epistles,² we find certain events in Jewish history alluded to, as typical of

² Clement: ad Cor. Ep. 1.

Christ and His church; and in a manner so judicious, that not even the most cautious opponent of allegory would venture to find fault. Another,³ however, of those early writers gives us mystical expositions of a character more visionary and questionable; some of which are applied to the person and sufferings of our blessed Saviour. In one of the works ascribed to Clement,⁴ we find an avowed recognition of the principle which we have already mentioned as having actuated Philo; and which, in fact, may be considered, when applied to Scripture in general, as the root of the evil with which the system of allegorical interpretation has been encumbered;—I mean the notion, that the Scriptures of the Old Testament contain many things, which, if understood in their literal sense, are contrary to the nature, and derogatory to the honour of the Deity. This writer affixes an allegorical meaning, and that with extreme license, to numberless portions of the narrative; the literal sense, indeed, is in all instances lightly treated, and in some it is entirely discarded. In short, in almost all of these early writers there is a too great proneness to depart from the rules of sober-minded criticism: and although we may acknowledge the beauty of certain of their illustrations,—as that, for instance, in which our Lord, by extending both His arms upon the cross, is said to signify that He

³ Barnabas.

⁴ Hom. xviii. § 19.

embraces both Jews and Gentiles in His covenant,—we should hesitate, nevertheless, to urge it as an argument, or insist upon it as a type. Without presuming to pronounce a condemnation where the voice of inspiration is silent, we should scarcely venture, nevertheless, to assent to the notion, that those sinful actions of prophets and patriarchs which are passed over without express censure, are to be understood as merely figurative, and in the real and literal sense were never committed. In following out an analogy which is instituted between Israel of old, and the Church of Christ, in reference to the spoiling of the Egyptians, the conclusion arrived at by Irenæus is somewhat startling. For he seems to infer, that if the spoil extracted from heathen nations by craft or violence, be dedicated to God's service, we are justified in carrying it off. In a certain sense—he observes—the heathen are our debtors; and we have the privilege of enjoying, without the labour of acquisition, that which it cost them much labour to acquire.⁵

And yet it is laid down by the same writer, as a canon of interpretation, that the only sound, and safe, and cautious, and true method of proceeding,⁶ is to apply figurative and typical language only to those

⁵ See Conybeare's Bampton Lect. p. 104.

⁶ Ὑγιῆς νοῦς καὶ ἀκίνδυνος καὶ εὐλαβὴς καὶ φιλαληθής. Lib. ii. cap. 46.

fundamental truths which have been clearly revealed, and generally acceded to by the Church.⁷ And since he has adhered, for the most part, with strictness to this rule, we are led to conjecture that such comments as those which we have been examining were adopted by him without suspicion, on the sanction of others who had gone before; and that they did not in reality originate with him, although we find them in his works.

As we descend to the school of Alexandria, we find symptoms, again, of that mistaken sensitiveness as to the estimation in which Scripture may be held by self-styled philosophers, which has been already animadverted upon:—an unwillingness to allow that any circumstances in the historical detail, of little apparent consequence, have been recorded by inspiration:—a disposition to call in the aid of allegory to maintain, as it would seem, its doubtful credit;—and with a great profession of reverence for Scripture, a kind of acknowledgment, that the literal and obvious sense of the narrative requires some external aid to support it.

A brief reference to the works of that Alexandrian expositor, whose name is associated more closely than any other with the history of allegorical interpretation, will suffice to show the truth of this. A con-

⁷ Ὅσα φανερώς καὶ ἀναμφιβόλως αὐτολεξεῖ ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς λέλεκται. Ibid.

siderable section in one part of his writings is occupied in an attempt to show, that the allegorical is the *only* method in which Scripture can be interpreted in a manner worthy of its Divine Author, or even intelligible to the reader.⁸ And he draws a contrast between the spiritual usefulness of the one interpretation, and the literal and carnal sense in which certain passages were received by his ignorant and superstitious contemporaries.

It is fearful to observe the peril of the position, in which this rash and visionary writer places himself. What can warrant the boldness of such an assertion as this :—that the main object of the Evangelists had respect to certain mysteries ; and that they were less anxious to relate according to strict historical truth, than to set forth the mysteries which rose out of it :⁹ —that it was their purpose, whenever circumstances should allow, to speak the truth both literally and figuratively ; but when both could not be, to prefer the spirit to the letter ; the spiritual truth being often preserved in what, we may venture, perhaps, to call, the literal and bodily *falsehood*?¹⁰ How can we for one moment listen to his suggestion ; that in the apparent discrepancies which occur in the Gospel narrative,—as, for instance, in the account of the pro-

⁸ Orig. Philocalia.

⁹ In Matt. Comm. Series, § 77. t. iii. p. 892, 3.

¹⁰ In Joann. Comm. x. § 3, 4.

cess which was adopted by our Lord for healing a blind man at the gate of Jericho,—such appearance of disagreement did not come of itself, but was framed with a special design to attract attention to the moral and mystery of the transaction, rather than the mere letter?¹¹

The effect produced in the mind of the writer himself was confusion, inconsistency, and doubt: and the attempts which have been made to reduce his system of interpretation to any thing like determinate and intelligible principles, have been singularly unfortunate. At one time he admits, that whenever the letter conduces to edification, it is not advisable to seek for allegory:¹² at another, he affirms that there is not, either in the Law or the prophets, one single iota, which does not admit of a mystic interpretation.¹³ He asserts, that in the historical parts of Scripture, there are things recorded which never took place according to the letter, and never could have taken place: other things there are which never took place, though it was not impossible that they might take place.¹⁴ And although he undertakes to adduce instances of what he has asserted; such as the passage in the Book of Genesis, in which God is spoken of as walking in the garden in the cool of the

¹¹ In Matt. Comm. tom. 16, § 12, t. iii. p. 732.

¹² Hom. in Num. xi.

¹³ Hom. in Exod. 1.

¹⁴ De Principiis, lib. iv.

day,—in the first case; and in the second, the plucking out a right eye, and the cutting off a right hand;—still, as if aware of the dangerous ground upon which he is standing, he requests his readers not to draw from these assertions that conclusion which it seems impossible to avoid, namely, that he would destroy the credit of the Scripture narrative altogether. At one time he points out the error of those, who, by their allegorical interpretation referred our Lord's miracles to the cure of spiritual diseases alone: at another, he exposes himself to the very same charge, by affixing to those miracles an explanation beyond the strict meaning of the narrative, and tending rather to supersede it. In fact, he has incurred a grave suspicion of aiming to degrade our blessed Redeemer Himself, to the merely allegorical type of a higher and more exclusively spiritual Saviour, the unseen and eternal Word of God.

In the course of three centuries, the constant practice of allegorical explanation had produced such a mass of comment and exposition, as to leave an imaginative mind very little scope for the production of any thing original. The field was altogether pre-occupied; the Old Testament having long ago been exhausted, and but little left untouched in the New. All the marrow and fatness of the grain was said to lie in the mystical sense; those who were acquainted only with the literal sense, were said to be living

upon chaff.¹⁵ The practice of allegorizing even the miracles, which we have before alluded to, had already commenced. The miraculous cures which our Lord wrought, were in general considered as typical of the Spiritual blessings consequent upon His death and passion. The resurrection of Lazarus, is the awakening the soul from the sleep of sin: and the voice which called him forth, is the voice which calls men from dead works to serve the living God.¹⁶ The miracle at Cana, is symbolical of the admission of the more distant inhabitants of Galilee on a like footing with the people of Jerusalem.¹⁷ The ship which carried the Apostles, is an emblem of the Church, which carries the faithful over the stormy ocean of the world.¹⁸ In our Lord's walking over the sea, is seen a type of His dominion over the great dragon which inhabits the deeps, even Satan.¹⁹ So very fanciful is the whole of this system of interpretation, that not only do we find (as has been already stated) different allegories founded upon the same fact by *different* writers, but even by the *same*. That woman bound by "a spirit of infirmity," upon whom our Lord exercised His miraculous power, is represented in one

¹⁵ Hieron. Comm. in Esaïæ, c. ii. p. 49.

¹⁶ Epiphan. tom. iii. p. 372.

¹⁷ Euseb. Evang. Dem.

¹⁸ Cyril. Alex. Comm. in Joan. c. ii.

¹⁹ Euseb. Evang. Dem.

place as a type of the *Church*;²⁰ and in a second passage of the same author, she is given as a type of *all mankind*, prone to earthly things, bending downwards to the earth.²¹ This writer would have done well to profit by his own warning: "Some people," he says, "by interpreting those miracles without sufficient carefulness, bring upon themselves destruction instead of salvation, and error instead of a knowledge of the truth."²²

In watching the progress of this mystical mode of interpretation through the subsequent ages of the Church, we shall find that in proportion as deference has been paid to the opinions and practice of the more visionary among the early expositors, so has a degree of sanction, more or less qualified, been assigned to it. And we shall also find, that it has proved of especial efficacy in supporting the erroneous doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome.

To assert, however, that the mystical comments of these expositors were not calculated to support the great practical and spiritual truths of religion, would be contrary to all truth. To speak in terms even approaching to disrespect, of their Christian faith and Christian intentions, and to depreciate their learning, their eloquence, or their ingenuity, would be equally

²⁰ Augustin. de Trin. l. 4.

²¹ Augustin. in Serm. 392.

²² Augustin. de Quæst. divers. ad Quæst. 64, tom. iv. p. 570.

unjustifiable. But it cannot be denied, that the very first principles of their favourite system were obscure; and that it was founded upon imagination, rather than reason. It may always be modified according to the religious prejudices of its votaries; and its general operation is injurious to that literal and historical research, without which no one, however spiritually disposed, can be a sound expositor of Holy Writ. To deduce topics of spiritual edification from a passage or narrative, although they do not flow directly from the literal meaning of the words, may be harmless. Not so, when they are set forth as the interpretation which was *intended*. If once admitted as a legitimate instrument, it may just as easily and as plausibly be employed in the propagation of error, as in the support of truth. And we know, that wild and visionary enthusiasts have frequently found in the mystical sense that countenance for their errors, which, in the literal interpretation they have sought for in vain.

An ingenious mind may discover some favourite dogma in almost every passage which is proposed; and the same text may be made to convey various, and even contradictory, opinions. So that instead of rendering the Gospel accessible to those for whom it is intended, it has a tendency the rather to encumber it with difficulties, and to represent it as perceptible in its full brightness only to a few. It leads to the

notion that Scripture is for the most part a sealed book ; and that to arrive at a full understanding—if indeed such understanding is ever attainable—of its spiritual treasures, is the privilege only of the contemplative and studious, the meditative scholar, and the mystical recluse.

LECTURE VIII.

2 TIMOTHY IV. 4.

AND THEY SHALL TURN AWAY THEIR EARS FROM THE TRUTH,
AND SHALL BE TURNED UNTO FABLES.

IN pursuance of our discussion of the question, whether it is probable that there lies hid in the miracles of our blessed Saviour any ulterior and mystical meaning,—having insisted upon the necessity of extreme caution in the propounding of any such mystical interpretation, and laid down certain maxims which have been recommended by judicious divines for our guidance in the matter,—I cannot more forcibly represent the danger that exists, and the necessity of such caution in guarding against it, than by bringing forward an instance recorded in the annals of our own Church, of the effect produced upon the visionary and unstable mind of a member of our own University,¹ by a too close and unscrupulous devotion to the practice.

¹ Thomas Woolston, B.D. Fellow of Sidney Sussex College. He died in 1732.

It is fortunate for our purpose, that we have an opportunity of ascertaining, from his own writings, the notions entertained by this person at successive periods of his life ; and of tracing thereby the gradual progress of his descent along the slippery and tortuous path of error.

It appears from his earliest production,² that he had already been occupied for some time in a diligent research into the writings of antiquity ;—that he was an implicit admirer of the allegorical explanations which he there discovered ;—and that his admiration was especially assigned to Origen. Although speaking not otherwise than with reverence of the miracles in general, he recommends that they be interpreted allegorically : and with respect to the miracles of Moses, he seems to intimate that we have sufficient encouragement to abandon the literal interpretation entirely. At a more mature period of his life, when it might have been hoped that a better judgment would have corrected the errors of youthful indiscretion, we find him hinting at a design of receding from the letter of Scripture in general ;³ and of rescuing, — as he terms it, — the Apostles, Evangelists, Prophets, and Fathers of the Church, out of the hands of those by whom the letter only is ex-

² The Old Apology for the Truth of the Christian Religion against the Jews and the Gentiles revived. Cambridge, 1705.

³ See his Letters to Whitby, and Bennet. 1720.

pounded. After the lapse of a few years more, the terms in which he speaks of the letter of Scripture are scarcely those of common decency; and at length, he breaks out into vehement declamation against the literal interpretation of all prophecy and all miracles whatever.⁴ The truth of the Resurrection, as usually understood, he positively denies: and he gives a significant intimation of what was passing in his mind relative to the other miracles, by declaring, that although he had, at that moment, no inclination to *expose* them in fact and circumstance; he believes, nevertheless, that it will some time be done. The terms in which he alludes to Jesus as a teacher and a moralist, are such as it would be painful to revert to. It is plain, indeed, that he is rapidly advancing in his career of blasphemous impiety. Very soon after this, he assails the narrative and circumstances of many of the miracles with sarcastic and contemptuous ridicule.⁵ He lays it down as one of the articles of his creed,—and that too on the alleged authority of the Fathers,—that when understood in their literal sense, as recorded by the Evangelists, the miracles are of a like character with the “lying wonders of Antichrist.” Even the Impostor of Arabia acknowledged that our Lord had given sight

⁴ See a Treatise entitled “The Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate,” 1725.

⁵ Six Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour, 1727—1729.

to a man born blind, and had cured the leprosy, and had raised out of their sepulchres dead persons to life: and yet by this advocate of mystical Christianity, these, and all the other miracles of Christ, are absolutely denied. By degrading the literal, he thought to exalt the mystical sense.

The great position which he labours to establish is thus laid down in his own words:—"That the history of Jesus's life, as recorded in the Evangelists, is an emblematical representation of His spiritual life in the soul of man; and His miracles are figurative of His mysterious operations: the four Gospels being in no part a literal story, but a system of mystical philosophy and theology."⁶ At this climax of mysticism he professes to have arrived by a legitimate process of reasoning. He argues, that miracles of healing are no proof of a Divine mission:—that "lying wonders" will not be distinguishable from wonders wrought in support of the truth. He pretends to have the authority of the Fathers for saying, that the miracles of Antichrist will equal those of Jesus; maintaining his assertion by reference to a treatise which bears the name of Augustin,⁷ but is generally considered to be spurious. He argues, that since we read in the Scriptures of a *diversity* of gifts, the power of working miracles, being only *one*

⁶ First Discourse on the Miracles, p. 64.

⁷ De Antichristo.

gift, cannot invest the worker of them with the authority of a Divine lawgiver.—If by all this is meant nothing more, than that we ought not to admit the evidence of miracles as sufficient to make us believe that a bad man, or a wicked doctrine, proceeds from God ; we should agree with him at once. For if there be any thing, either in the miracles themselves, or in the character of Him who performs them, at variance with our instinctive perception of what is right, it has already been shown that such miracles cannot be received as a proof of a Divine mission. But it has also been shown, that in this admission there is nothing to invalidate the authority and evidence of the miracles wrought by our blessed Saviour.

Professing, as he does, to justify his rejection of the literal sense by the testimony of antiquity, he fortifies himself behind a goodly array of quotations. Some of these quotations are taken from writings of questionable, or worse than questionable, authority :—others are most shamefully garbled and distorted to suit his purpose :—and it is scarcely needful to add, that their real value amounts simply to nothing. He disregards the context ; suppresses the mention of a literal sense, while the mystical is given at large ; and quotes objections, without alluding to the answers made to those objections by the very writers from whom he has quoted them.

In reference, for instance, to that argument already

alluded to, by which it is made to appear that certain prophecies of Isaiah, which in their literal sense foretell the miraculous healing of bodily diseases by the Messiah, foretell also the healing of diseases of the soul,—he goes so far as to assert, that the Fathers understood them in the figurative sense exclusively.⁸ Numberless passages may be adduced to prove the contrary ; and yet he persists in his assertion. Safely, indeed, may we affirm, that in the instances in which a secondary meaning is given to the prophecies in question, it is not done without applying them, either directly or by implication, to the literal performance of the miracles in the first place. So far from excluding the literal sense, the Fathers are careful, for the most part, not to superadd a mystical sense, except on the foundation of the letter. And yet, whenever this objector was able to light upon any allusion to *moral* infirmities, or *moral* blindness, he seems to have taken it for granted that the infirmity and blindness of the *body* were denied.

It is only justice to the credit of the ancient writers quoted by him with so much confidence, to observe, that he has ventured upon omissions and misrepresentations of the most shameless character ; and that if he can only succeed in making it appear that they reject the literal narrative of the miracles, truth and reason are altogether disregarded. If one

⁸ First Discourse, &c. p. 16.

of them, for instance, in speaking of that single sufferer who was healed at the pool of Bethesda, remarks,⁹—that the power and goodness of the Saviour were capable of healing all the miserable objects assembled there; and that if we examine the fact according to human reason, we shall find that in comparison with what His power might have effected, there was no mighty act in this single cure; and that it was but a trifle when viewed in reference to His boundless compassion; and that we may infer from this that men's souls were rather the objects of His regard than their bodies;—if, I say, we meet with such a passage as this in the writings of Augustin, we shall find, on turning to the pages of this objector, that what was thus said in connexion with one particular miracle, arising out of the particular circumstances under which it was wrought, is unfairly applied to the miracles in general.¹⁰ We are led to conclude, in short, that Augustin had rejected the literal sense of the miracles altogether; on the ground of their being unworthy of the power and goodness of God.—And if, again, the same writer, in another place,¹¹ comparing the evidence of prophecy with that of miracles, makes the obvious remark, that the former possesses an especial value, inasmuch as it is

⁹ Augustin: in Joan. c. v. tract. 17.

¹⁰ First Discourse, &c. p. 10.

¹¹ Augustin: contra Faust. l. xii. c. 45.

not liable to be imputed to the agency of magic ; we find this objector asserting boldly, and without reserve, that Augustin has said that it was possible for miracles, such as those of our Saviour, to have been effected by magic. If Augustin simply remarks, that spiritual cures are greater than cures of the body ; we are told that he speaks of the latter with contempt. Even the silence of the Fathers he turns to the support of his own hypothesis. For, in speaking of a certain miracle, he expresses his persuasion, that if the commentaries of Origen on this part of Scripture had been extant, we should have found that he did not believe a single word of the direct narrative.¹²

It is unnecessary, however, to spend our time in exposing the unfairness of these detached and solitary quotations, when we remember that in the ancient Apologies, the whole argument is made to rest upon the fact of the miracles having been wrought, according to the simple and literal tenor of the Gospel history. This is the very groundwork of the whole edifice ; and if, in some cases, it is rather implied than asserted, the position will be rather corroborated thereby, than otherwise. How can any one question the literal interpretation of the miracles, and pretend to do this on the authority of the Fathers, when we

¹² First Discourse, &c. p. 34.

find it asserted by one of the Apologists,¹³ that some persons who had been the objects of our Lord's miraculous power, being cured of their diseases by Him, or raised to life from the dead, had survived even to his own times? Out of the innumerable passages of similar import which might be quoted, it may suffice to bring forward an eloquent and spirited remonstrance,¹⁴ addressed to the impugnors of our blessed Lord's divinity; and having for its very foundation the literal narrative of the miracles, which are enumerated in detail.—“Was He a mortal, or one of ourselves,—it is asked,—who put to flight fever, and diseases, and tortures of the body, by His simple word; who walked upon the sea, and commanded the tempest to be still; Nature herself paying homage to Him as her Lord? Was He one of us, whose presence the devils that had entered into human bodies being unable to endure, withdrew from their possession; affrighted by the exercise of a power which they had not hitherto experienced? Was He one of us, who saw what men were turning over in their most secret thoughts, and understood the meditations of the most reserved?”—And after having thus enumerated all our Lord's wonderful works, he observes, in conclusion, that they were not

¹³ Quadratus, as quoted by Eusebius, *Ecc. Hist.* l. iv. c. 3.

¹⁴ Arnobius, *Adv. Gentes*, p. 26.

wrought to gratify a vain ostentation of power, but to convince unbelievers that what He promised was truth ; and also, that from the compassionate and beneficial tendency of these works, they might understand what is the nature of the true God.

It cannot, however, be denied, that a want of caution in using and speaking of the allegorical mode of interpretation, on the part of some of the ancient expositors,—those being chiefly of the Alexandrian school,—supplied this unhappy man with some shadow of ground for his theory. Captivated with a sort of spiritual wit which had grown into fashion, and which afforded an agreeable entertainment to their popular auditories, they were ever on the look out for some novel connexion of spiritual ideas,—some apt similitudes, striking allusions, and amusing mysteries. Inasmuch, however, as they did not profess to have derived them either from inspiration, or from Apostolical tradition, they cannot be regarded in any other light than as mere private thoughts. But their followers, instead of separating these bright and superficial ideas from the narrative of Scripture, applauded the association ; and notwithstanding the remonstrances of the more cautious, this injudicious affectation of allegories prevailed to a very considerable extent. By degrees there sprung out of it an unhappy practice of alluding to the literal sense with something like indifference ; and of drawing comparisons between the literal and the

spiritual sense, which were scarcely to be justified. The mystical sense was made to impugn, and even to exclude, the literal; although that literal sense was in no respect at variance with the rest of Scripture, or the common principles of truth. Actuated by a desire of repelling the objections of unbelievers; or led in some cases by a natural fondness for allegory, and by the hope of disguising a scantiness of critical knowledge by involving the subject in mysteries; they attempted to vitiate the literal narrative of the creation of the world, the fall of man, and other parts of the Sacred History. Unbelievers have not overlooked the advantage which accrues to their cause, from this conversion of the realities of Scripture into fiction and fable; and they rejoice to see its miracles so mystified by being thus made the vehicles of hidden instruction, that one, who by profession, at least, was a Christian, was brought thereby to an undisguised denial of their literal truth.

To examine in detail the rude and startling reflections cast by him upon the literal narrative of the miracles, would be an irksome task. At the time, however, it was thought so important that an antidote should go along with the poison, as to induce several of the most learned divines of the period¹⁵ to send forth an elaborate refutation of them. His aim was

¹⁵ Smallbrooke, Bishop of St. David's; Pearce, Bishop of Rochester; and others.

to place all supporters of the literal sense between the horns of a dilemma. He argues, that such is the improbability of the circumstances attending some of the miracles, as to render it necessary either to withdraw our assent entirely from the Gospel as a Divine revelation, or to conclude that these miracles in their literal sense never took place ; and that the history of them was intended, like the parables, merely to convey some spiritual instruction. And he professes to have discovered such inconsistencies and absurdities in the literal narrative, as will fully bear him out in his assertion. These objections are for the most part so frivolous, that if I proceed to bring any of them out of their dusty oblivion, it will be rather from a desire to show the height of folly to which this unhappy man was carried, than to recapitulate, as needful in this place, the serious refutation of them.

His preliminary objection to the miracles of healing, is founded upon an alleged want of accuracy in this part of the Gospel narrative. If they had been intended, he argues, as proofs of a Divine mission, the disease would have been specified more accurately and scientifically ; and the mode of operation in healing would have been described so cautiously, as to convince the world that the cure was indeed supernatural.

In reply to this, it is to be observed, that in certain instances the manner of our Lord's operation is described with much preciseness : and that it con-

sisted merely of some outward act, apparently intended to call the attention of the bystanders to the miracle which He was about to perform. Of this character, (as we have already observed,) was the taking of the dead person by the hand, and the touching the eyes of the blind. In other instances, as if to make known that it was by Himself that the miracle was wrought, and that He publicly assumed the power of working it, the cure was effected by a word. And, after all, if the disease be actually removed, it is of little consequence to know whether it was done by means which are not naturally competent to such an effect, or without any outward and ostensible means at all.

In short, the facts, as they are recorded, seem to be precisely such as to render the whole narrative in this respect least liable to objection. No process of operation having being employed, no process of operation is mentioned. Any other course that might have been adopted, would probably have left it less clear that the cure was miraculous ; and would certainly have afforded the caviller a larger field to expatiate upon.

And in like manner, supposing that one of the Evangelists,—Luke, for instance, the physician, as has been suggested,—had described in technical language, according to the degree of medical knowledge at the time, the symptoms of some particular disease, with elaborate dissertations upon its cha-

racter; should we have been one whit better convinced that it was a disease difficult or impossible to cure, than we are now by their simple statement, that the object of the miracle was a leper, a paralytic, or one curtailed of his natural proportions? And would not their technical phraseology, in the present improved state of science, be made by the scoffer a subject of ridicule? The imparting of scientific knowledge came not within the scope of revelation: and any incidental allusions to science in the Scripture are founded upon, and assimilated to, the degree of knowledge in the age in which they were written. Suffice it to observe, that although this caviller of after times professes to doubt whether the cures were miraculous, no such doubt was entertained by our Lord's contemporaries, whether friends or enemies. They differed certainly in one point; but that was on the mode of *accounting for* this miraculous power; the one ascribing it to the agency of God, and the other to Satan.

Out of the number of those miracles, against the literal narrative of which this caviller has directed his attacks, we will select one, against which he has argued with the greatest degree of plausibility;—one, in which the latent existence of a spiritual meaning cannot be doubted:—I mean the destruction of the unfruitful fig-tree. A miracle it is, in the circumstances of which, unlike the tenor of our Lord's miracles in general, there is some appearance of seve-

city : so that it is only by regarding its tendency to warn a guilty nation of impending ruin, that we arrive at its true character and object.

Some of the cavils which he raises are so trifling, as never to be likely to be brought again into notice from the oblivion into which they have descended. It will be allowed, however, that there is some plausibility in his question :—“ How could Jesus expect to find figs upon the tree, when it is stated by one of the Evangelists, that the time of figs had not yet arrived ?” This question, however, plausible though it be, could not be asked seriously by any one acquainted with the nature and cultivation of the tree itself, and with the critical interpretation of the passage in which the miracle is recorded. When we find, both from the Scriptures and from Josephus,¹⁶ that the early fruits were ripe at the time of the Passover, which was only three days after this :—when we find, also, that in Palestine the fig makes its appearance before the leaf ; so that the very fact of there being leaves afforded a fair presumption that there was fruit also :—when we find again, that some fig-trees bore two or even three crops in the year ; and that it was usual for the fruit to hang upon the tree for a considerable length of time ; so that the figs of the preceding year might still be hanging upon the tree ;—with all these established facts, any

¹⁶ De Bell. Jud. l. iv. c. 7.

one of which would account for the expectation, that there might be figs upon the tree at the time when our Lord sought for them, we cannot agree with him in designating that expectation as unreasonable.

And a very little critical knowledge would have shown him, that the "time of figs," spoken of by St. Mark, may be rendered also "the time of *gathering* figs:"—and if the time of gathering figs had not yet arrived, was it not an additional reason for expecting to find the figs upon the tree? The first-fruits of the gathering were not offered, until the morrow of the Sabbath which followed the Passover: therefore the time of gathering had not yet arrived; but it was near at hand. Having started, however, with the determination to discover what he terms absurdities in the letter of the narrative, the objector is fully satisfied that he has effected his purpose here. Sheltering himself under the authority of an unguarded assertion made by Augustin,¹⁷ that the fact of this miracle, unless it be understood in a figurative sense, is without meaning; he rushes at once to the conclusion, that the literal sense of the narrative ought to be rejected altogether.

Another of his arguments in justification of his rejection of the historical fact, is as follows:—that supposing Jesus had^e found the fruit which He

¹⁷ Hoc factum, nisi figuratum accipiatur, stultum invenitur. Augustin: tom. x. p. 748.

sought upon the tree, He had no right to take that which was the property of another; and that the blasting of the tree was an act of injury done to some imaginary person, whom he designates its proprietor. And yet the tree is expressly described as growing by the wayside,—an uncultivated tree,—of common right, and in the common field. And even if this had not been the case, there was a merciful indulgence granted by the law¹⁸ to every traveller, in respect to the grapes in his neighbour's vineyard, and the corn in his neighbour's field; which indulgence, by parity of reason, they were accustomed to extend (as we have express evidence) to all common fruits; and in particular to the olive, the date, and the fig. Of the grapes he might eat his fill, provided that he carried them not away in a vessel;—and of the corn he might pluck the ears with his hand, provided that he moved not unto it a sickle. By virtue of this law, the wayfaring man, whether he were a Hebrew or an alien, was deemed to have a right to eat of any fruit which thus fell in his way, as freely as if it were his own property.

And with respect to the destruction of the tree,—the loss of a barren fig-tree,—an object so worthless and contemptible, as to have passed into a proverb,—what was it, but an anticipation of the sentence which even its owner, (if indeed it had an

¹⁸ Deut. xxiii. 24, 25.

owner,) would have been the first to pass upon it ;—
“Cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground !” Our
blessed Saviour could not have selected an object of
less value ; nor could He have exhibited an act of
destruction, in which the destructive power would
have been employed with less severity.—How could
He have given a more forcible warning against un-
productiveness, than by smiting a tree, which, while
others in that fruitful soil and genial climate were
producing two, or even three, crops of fruit within
the year, in spite of all its show of leaves, had pro-
duced nothing ? How could He with more gentle-
ness have exhibited that chastising power, which He
will one day exercise, in its full rigour, against all
who bring not forth the fruits of righteousness ; than
by choosing an object, which, although containing
within it the principle of life, was insensible of pain ?—
Consider the storm of hail, which at Moses’ bidding
smote every herb and broke every tree in the land of
Egypt, at the time when barley was in the ear, and
flax approaching to maturity ; then look at this sin-
gle fig-tree,—barren, valueless, and cumbering the
ground, — which, at Jesus’ bidding, withered away,
and made room for another better than itself. In
how marvellous a manner was justice tempered with
mercy !—After having shown His tenderness by in-
numerable acts of healing, wrought upon all that
came to Him for relief ; He wrought *one* miracle as
an emblem of severity to the unfruitful : — and that,

not upon a man, but upon a fig-tree. How reckless the impiety of him who has left upon record such an observation as the following ;—that if, according to the literal narrative, our blessed Lord had thus trespassed (as he terms it) upon the property of others, there would have been no occasion to bring forward *false* witnesses against him at his trial !¹⁹

There can be no doubt as to the right over this tree, and over its fruit, which Jesus would have possessed by the common law of the land, had He been neither the Christ, nor a Prophet, nor even an Israelite,—but merely a stranger, a wayfaring man, journeying through the country. We have descended to this low ground, in order to meet the rude assailant upon his own terms. But, according to the scheme of the Gospel,—as a Prophet sent from God, acting by the Spirit of God, even the Son of Him who had so often, in the days of old, declared that He would lay the land waste, and destroy the trees with their fruits, “because of the iniquity of the inhabitants thereof;”—in the performance of this miracle the Saviour exercised a right which requires not our arguments for its justification.

It has already been observed, that the similarity of circumstances between this miracle and a certain parable, related by the Evangelists, is so striking, as to afford a strong presumption that the miracle,

¹⁹ First Discourse, &c. p. 38.

like the parable, was intended to be a lesson against all unproductive uselessness. If we refer to the tenor of our Lord's observations at the time, and of the parables which He delivered in immediate connexion with it, this interpretation will be confirmed. The perverse unprofitableness of that son, who, when sent by his father to work in the vineyard, said, "I go, Sir," and yet went not:—and the miserable fate of the husbandmen, who despitefully treated the servants sent by their lord to receive the fruits of the vineyard, and slew his son:—and the denunciation with which our Lord wound up His discourses,—“Therefore I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof:”²⁰ (which is a key, as it were, to the whole;)—all this conspires to teach us, that the fig-tree was intended to represent the nation of the Jews; and that in consequence of their rejection of the Gospel, they were already consigned over to destruction; to wither away as a nation, and to be dried up by the roots. A sentence, which has been signally verified by their continuance in the same state of barrenness, under the moral of the curse pronounced upon the fig-tree. The *literal* narrative, then, of this miracle, will endure the test of the severest examination; and with respect to its actual performance, in the plain meaning of the

²⁰ Matt. xxi. 43.

words, there can be no ground for doubt or cavil. And it conveys, also, a *spiritual* meaning which could not fail to be suggested at the time. All spiritual barrenness, whether in individuals in particular, or in nations in the aggregate, cannot escape the warning given,—by a *figurative history* in the parable, and in the miracle by an instant and striking *example*.

It has been very wisely remarked, that many of the pernicious errors by which the faith at various times has been obscured, have originated in the attempt to carry out a legitimate principle too far,—in the injudicious application of a doctrine, which, in itself, is not otherwise than accordant with the truth. Of this we have a striking instance in the case before us. That a spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures, and in some respects even of the *miracles* of Scripture, is to a certain extent authorized by the inspired writers themselves, cannot be questioned, without in some measure questioning the fact of their inspiration : nor can any faithful expositor, in the face of such authority, argue against its reception. And yet we see whither it may carry an unstable and visionary mind, if applied indiscriminately and without extreme caution. By how much the more strange and monstrous this man's conclusions may appear, by so much the more need is there of circumspection in those, who find themselves travelling along the path by which he arrived at them.

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²¹ Bentley's Commencement Sermon, 1696.

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